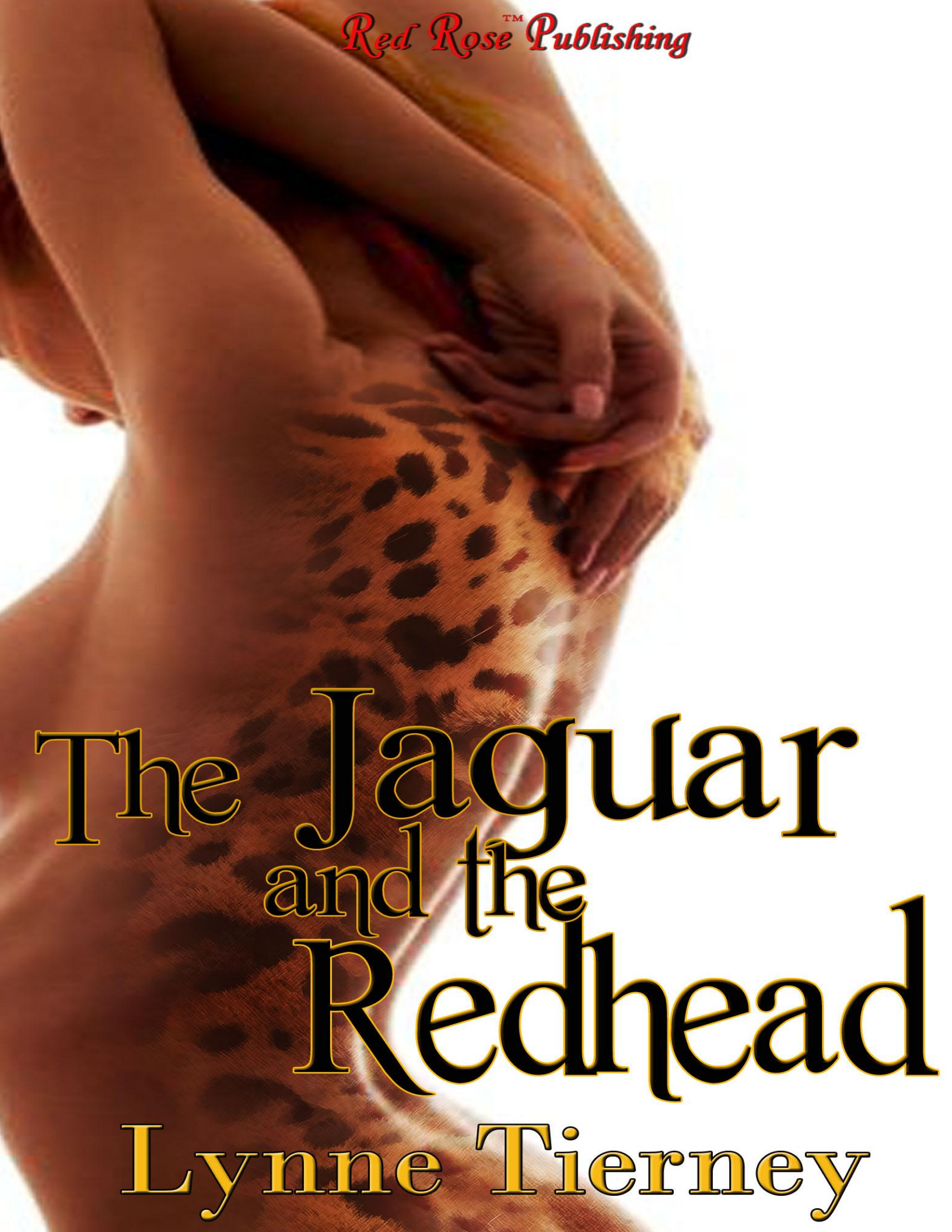


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The Jaguar
and the
Redhead

Lynne Tierney

*The Jaguar and
the Redhead*

By

Lynne Tierney



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Chapter One

The needle on the old Cessna's fuel gauge bounced beyond the empty mark, and Robina's body jumped into panic mode. An eternity later, catching sight of a small green dot in the middle of the ocean, she breathed a little easier.

Soon flying over an island's thousand shades of green, Bill Hansen, the heavily perspiring pilot, lined up with a tiny strip of reddish dirt, reduced the power of the old plane and prepared to land. Upward clutching tree branches scratched at its belly when the plane banked sharply. Dropping to the ground like a lead weight, it ploughed through thick vegetation and mud holes as the jungle rushed up to meet them. In rapid succession, brakes screeched, trees snapped and mud and leaves covered the windows. The right wing broke off just before Robina's world turned black.

On awakening, Robina looked up into a pair of golden, hypnotic eyes belonging to a dark skinned half-naked man. His dense pile of straight black hair, slicked down with oil and tied back with a piece of leather, outlined a lightly oiled deep mahogany face and reminded her of the thirties' Mexican actor, Ramon Navarro. Probably in his mid-thirties, wearing only shorts and no shoes, he sat on

a stool beside her working some kind of lotion into her skin.

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You’re finally awake!” Gazing down at her, he gave her a cool appraising look. “Your eyes look healthy and you have no fever.”

“Finally awake? How long have I been out?” She fought to regain control of her thundering heart while trying to work up some saliva in her mouth.

“For a few hours. But comas, no matter how long they last, cause some brain damage. So you need to rest. Try to stay calm. You took a blow to the top of your head—there might be a concussion—and you suffered some bruising to your body, as well. So I’ve been covering your skin with healing herbs.” Studying her with a tender intensity, he continued to apply the warm ointment.

Reaching up, she gently ran her hand over the bump. “A coma? I’ve been in a coma? Where am I? Who are you? Did you undress me?” Splayed out on a floor mat like a side of beef, she wore two strips of material loosely referred to as underwear.

“I’m Elejandro Herrera, a botanist research professor from New York. This is my herbal hut. And yes, I removed your clothes because the mosquitoes were trapped inside. After this, tuck your pants inside your boots.”

“Robina Kilmartin, buffalo rancher from Wyoming. How about Bill? Did he make it?”

“No, he died. His injuries were extensive. The cockpit was almost sheared

off, so you're lucky to be alive. I managed to rescue your two backpacks before the plane burst into flames." He nodded toward the backpacks leaning against the legs of a long wooden table.

"Damn it. Bill was retired. Interesting man...great storyteller. He'd traveled extensively. I met him in Perth, and he took a fatherly interest in me. When he offered to fly me to Peru in his plane, I accepted. Bad choice, as it turns out."

The brittle, spicy aromatic smells in the hot, humid room were intoxicating, almost dizzying. The combination of Elejandro's voice, low and rough with concern, his woody scent and his rugged, vital power, encouraged her to grab at this chance to soak up some great vibes. *Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit.* For all she knew, he could be some kind of a phony healer. They skulked around in tropical rainforests and played tricks on the unwary traveler. "I'd like to stand up."

"Do you feel nauseous?" She gave a negative shake to her head. "Headache?" He got an affirmative nod. "I'd like to cover the rest of your body." He held up a jar. "Bites get infected in this climate."

"Okay. I'll try to relax." Definitely a New Yorker—maybe not a native—he'd picked up the habit of dropping his r's: "fever" became "feva" and "cover" became "cova."

Chanting as he worked on her legs, arms and belly, she hungrily absorbed the marvelous sound, and it gradually calmed her spirit. Startled when his hand

slipped down to the nest of red curls at the base of her belly, her eyes flew open. While backpacking, her waxing routine remained on hold, so her bush grew in wild disarray. *What the f...? Am I embarrassed about my luxuriant womanly triangle? Shouldn't I be more upset about my jaws of life being yanked apart?*

Raising herself up on one elbow—the soreness in her side caused her to let out an involuntary gasp—she pushed his hand away. “I’ll finish the job if you don’t mind. What I need are a couple of aspirin...I’ve got some in my backpack.” Why didn’t she insist he cease and desist his hands-on doctoring when first aware of her near-nakedness? With the destruction of a few million brain cells, her IQ must’ve slipped lower than room temperature.

Her body fought for dominance over her mind when he took her by the shoulders and lifted her up against his hairless, broad muscular torso. A tumble of wild emotions, mysterious desires and strange urges surfaced and threatened to lead her into some kind of sexual arc. Was he conjuring up some kind of spellbinding wizardry? Maybe he poured a love potion of leaves, roots and seeds onto his skin to make himself irresistible. So she’d better stop breathing him in as if he were her only source of oxygen. Reaching over to the bench to the side of her, she grabbed her jeans and blouse. Dizziness suddenly overcame her, so she sat down and put them on. Even brain damaged, it didn’t make sense to be this discombobulated. If she didn’t squelch her overactive imagination, this island

rainforest would swallow her whole.

As she tucked her jeans firmly into her boots, thoughts came at her in a chaotic rush. With her plan to meet up with her sister and hike up to Machu Picchu no longer a given, getting off this island took over as her next adventure. To accomplish that, she needed more than a pair of good legs and a high level of energy. Without food, shelter and transportation, she might as well be naked beneath the jungle's blinding sun.

When she stood, Elejandro handed her a small wooden bowl that felt warm to the touch. Inhaling the rich spicy scent, she frowned and looked up at him. A large man, he shot up at least another eight or nine inches above her five feet six. "I need to know what's in this brew." There. She was back in control.

"It's a concoction of leaves and roots to promote wellness. Tonic-like herbs such as Sarsaparilla." His voice held an imploring lilt to it. Long, dark lashes cast shadows on his high cheekbones as he leaned over her and ran his hand over her shoulder.

Oops, don't touch, Elejandro. Her nervous system had already performed its limit of spectacular acrobatics. Dammit, she blushed. *Well, that just chaps my ass.* Now she blushes! Why didn't her whole body turn red when she found herself on the floor almost stark naked? Or when her body was pushed up against his and she got all hot and bothered?

As she sipped the potion, Elejandro began to chant again. Taking another sip, and another, and another, she drained the contents of the bowl. A pleasant, warm force soon swirled through her nervous system. Parts of her body still ached, but the pain eased down to tolerable.

In an effort to break free of the emotional rollercoaster her body insisted on generating, she walked around the large room. The three crude log tables scattered around the perimeter held bottles, jars and bowls of herbs and spices. On the floor, open burlap sacks displayed leaves, twigs and roots and fresh dried herbs hung from the ceiling. Seeds, tinctures, potions and teas were labeled, lying on rough-hewn shelving.

Going over to one of the benches, she sat down. Elejandro followed her, pulled up a small stool and sat opposite her. “I hope that drink you gave me doesn’t cause hallucinations. I read about plant doctors who specialize in trances. Are you one of them?”

His laugh indicated that he found her question thoroughly amusing.

“So far, my only clients are sick animals. And there’s no smoking and blowing involved in their treatments.”

“Come on. What about those special healing teas cooked up by shamans down here in the tropics? People from all over the world come down here to partake.”

“True. True. I’m the last person to trivialize sacred power plants. But I have no interest in their hallucinogenic properties.”

He gave her such an intense look that she waited for his next words partly in anticipation, partly in dread. “You’re not about to lift my spirits, are you?”

“No. My yacht’s been stolen and I don’t own a plane. So I’m afraid you’re stuck here for awhile.”

“Stuck here for awhile? You mean there’s a chance for escape?” The sexy outlaw, who lived inside her twenty-five year old body and came out to play during the past hour, finally scurried underground for good. Back on track, she needed to keep in mind that this fascinating fellow, by just looking at her, left every exposed square inch of her body completely scorched.

“On the other side of this island, there’s a village, Luizao, where an evil bugger, Gunther Wolsey, rules with an iron hand. That’s where my yacht’s been taken. A couple of days ago, when I went out fishing, Gunther’s gang grabbed my young assistant, my yacht and all my technical supplies. They also took my satellite phone and the radiophone. I had all the necessary satellite receiving equipment installed, but here I am with no way of communicating with the outside world. I can’t even contact the Perth Airport and report Bill Hansen’s death.”

“Tell me about the village. Maybe someone there can help me get over to

Peru.”

“I visited Luizao three years ago; about four hundred peace loving Latinos live there. Descendants of the Incas and the Spanish, their lives revolve around fishing, farming and hunting.”

“Three years? You’ve been here for three years? All alone?” Solitary confinement on an isolated island received no mention on her wish list. Talking to a soccer ball wouldn’t do it for her. In no time at all, she’d be totally unhinged.

“No. As I said, I brought an assistant with me—a veterinarian graduate at the university where I taught—twenty-five year old Jerry Walsh. When he got his degree, he asked if he could work with me while I did my research in the rainforest.”

“And your yacht ran into problems, and you were forced to land here.”

“No, this is where we dropped anchor without any problems.”

“You knew about this island?”

“No. We came upon it by accident on our way to South America. And we fell in love with the place.”

“What kind of work are you doing? Something for the U.S. government, the U.N. or some world organization?”

“No. Just two guys trying to find some plants that’ll cure mankind’s worse diseases. Without Jerry, my work’s at a standstill.”

“So you’re going to rescue him. Right?” His steady scrutiny unnerved her. Could he read her mind? What kind of qualities did he hope to find? Fearlessness? Submissiveness? Strength? *Duh, is a frog’s ass water-tight?* As a healer, checking to see if his herbs worked their wonders on her body would be his one and only concern. She wondered if his powers were able to pick up on her newest disorder. Was going goo-goo eyed over his machismo a treatable condition?

“Well, that’s not going to be so easy. A couple of months ago, Jerry and I took a canoe trip to Luizao. My God, what a difference in the place. We didn’t dare go into the village. We met a farmer, Paola Pentido, on the outskirts, and he told us that the villagers were forced to work in a huge open pit gold mine.

“A year ago, according to Paola, a ruthless miner, Gunther Wolsey, heard that a large chunk of gold showed up near the Zoala River. Accompanied by two dozen gunslingers, he landed his helicopter on the beach and took over the village. For the past year, he’s ruled over the four hundred inhabitants like some feudal lord.”

“Jeez, rescuing Jerry doesn’t sound like a walk in the park, then.”

“No. I need someone covering my back when I make the rescue attempt.” Measuring her for a moment, his eyes held hers with a searching gravity. And there was no way she could miss the noticeable note of pleading in his voice.

An oddly primitive warning had her flinching and spasms of alarm sounded

in her head. She looked around the large hut as if looking for signs of life. “I hope you’ve got some trained monkeys lined up to help you because I don’t see any humans around these parts.”

He gave her a bland half-smile and then eyed her with a concerned expression. “I’m desperate. I’m responsible for Jerry. There’s got to be a way to get him back here.”

“I’ve hiked into rainforests before. But they were guided tours. If you expect me to turn into a guerilla fighter, forget it.”

“If you want to get off this island, I’ve got to get my yacht back.” Abruptly, with noticeable force, his strong jaw widened and his teeth appeared to lengthen and push against his cheeks.

“I’m sorry. Infiltrating a gang of thugs and making off with their captive is not on my résumé.” She’d swear his facial structure spasmed. *What’s next? Bones crunching? Fangs forming?* Jeez, he didn’t have to scare the living daylight out of her.

“Sorry, I came on like a wild man, didn’t I? I didn’t mean to scare you...my anger got the better of me. For Gunther to snatch Jerry... The kid’s a tough little bugger, but with a gun at his head... What the hell does he want him for? He’s a harmless animal doctor.” He ran his hands through his thick black hair, his scary facial contortions slowly reverting and settling into a dejected expression.

Shit fire and save matches. Putting her trust in him loomed as the only way to

go. Going on this stomach-churning rescue mission or remaining stuck on the island—those were her “rock or hard place” choices. Besides, she sensed this mouth-watering hunk had some kind of super powers going for him. So, no more thinking about backpacking up to Machu Picchu. Her sister traveled with a group of hikers, so she’d be okay. Besides, they’d made no definite plans about joining up. She’d planned on surprising her.

“Okay. I’m in,” she said, “but do you really think the two of us can take Gunther down?”

“If we disguise ourselves and stay out of sight until dark, we can give it a good try. I’ve got jars of dyes and tints for your hair and body. With a wide-brimmed hat, brown hair and a dark tan, you’ll blend in with the Latinos.

“According to Paola, the farmer I talked to, every able-bodied man works outdoors in a huge water-filled open pit panning for gold. After the mosquitoes come out around four, the workers are desperate to get some relief. In no time at all, they fill up the village’s two bars. So there’s always a chance the thugs get wasted, too.” The deep gruffness in his voice softened and his eyes lost their piercing golden glow. “The guys will take note of the new gal. They’re short of women in the village; the ratio of young women to young men is around six to ten, according to Paola.”

“Come on, Doctor, I sensed you weren’t a regular human from the moment I

laid my eyes on you. You've got some kind of magical powers going for you. Psychic powers? Mind control?"

Amusement flashed in his eyes and his mouth quirked with humor as he tipped his head in the direction of the door and indicated they should leave. "I'm hoping you're my secret weapon. If you hadn't dropped out of the sky, I'd be forced to try and lure a few disgruntled Luizao villagers over to my side. But that would take time. And maybe Jerry doesn't have any. I'm sure the kid aggravated Gunther in some way. Unknowingly, of course."

"Honestly, Elejandro, I am ill equipped to be of any help to you." Robina grabbed her backpacks and followed him out of the herbal center to the hut next door.

"You'll be surprised at the strengths you'll be able to draw on."

Her doubts and fears scattered from hell to breakfast, and she desperately needed time to calm down. After climbing a seven-foot ladder made of poles secured with vines, she found herself in a high-roofed large open area. Walls of bamboo siding with screened windows made for a pleasant breezy atmosphere and slender tree trunks spanned the walls providing support for the roof timbers.

"Did you hire a few of the Luizao men to help you build this place and your herbal hut?"

"No. Jerry and I built them. Not bad, eh? We call this structure a lodge."

“It’s great.” Two split tree-trunks served as the table and bar. Completing the kitchen area were a kerosene refrigerator and several rattan chairs. In the area set aside for sleeping were four hammocks strung up between the cross poles and covered in mosquito netting. Strings were tied between the poles where clothes hung. “No bathrooms?”

“We use the river for bathing, and there’s a pit toilet out back.”

Robina pointed to the brownish field out front. “If Bill hadn’t been able to make that emergency landing in your front yard, I’d be dead. It looks like a fire swept through there recently. What happened?”

“I burned it on purpose. Fire is our combination plow and fertilizer. Slashing and burning releases the nutrients in the soil. Out back, I have great crops of beets, yams, pumpkins, rice, corn and cassava.”

“Interesting.” To say the guy had settled in, put it mildly. He probably planned on staying here forever. When it came to living without air-conditioning, running water, toilets and a TV, the doc experienced no problem. “Is it all right if I take my bags and get acquainted with my hammock?”

“Pick out any one of them. We’ll eat in the lean-to outside in an hour or so. Then we’ll talk about how we’re going to rescue Jerry and get my yacht back.”

“It’s a tall order, but someone’s got to do it.” Humor—where did it come from? Truth be told, black fright rioted inside her body and threatened to wash

over her like an erupting volcano.

The vibrancy in his laughter caused a warm current of blood to race through her body. My God, what was wrong with her? Her emotions scampered around from one end of the spectrum to the other. The way this guy projected such an influence on her was downright disconcerting. He'd yanked her so far out of her comfort zone, she wondered if she'd ever find her way back.



Elejandro stood by his motorized dugout the following morning. Picking up his gear, he threw it into the bow. “Good morning, Robina,” he said, when she appeared on the beach, “Did you sleep well?”

“It didn’t take me long to get used to the sounds of the insects, tree frogs and monkeys. But that scorpion I saw in the thatched roof—it kept me awake for awhile.”

“If you don’t bother it, you won’t get stung. Now, how about your gear?” He sure hoped she didn’t get too skittish around wild animals. His DNA differed from other humans. A shape shifter, he became a jaguar on command.

“I’ve brought along everything I’ll need for hiking and also the things you suggested.”

He took a long look at her. Like him, she wore light pants and a long-sleeved shirt. On her feet, she wore gumboots in readiness for mucking about in muddy

water and drenched leaf-covered trails. Sunlight shimmered on her lightly suntanned face and spoke of northern climates. Her hair shone a brilliant red and, for some reason, that heavy cascade of curls affected him in mystifying ways, and stirred parts of his body that were best kept dormant.

Traveling alone to strange lands and hiking for the sheer love of it took guts. As a wanderer and lover of the open road, Robina's adventurous spirit made her the right person when it came to helping him outwit Gunther and his men.

Somewhat like a prompter whispering dialogue to an actor onstage, he reminded himself of her youth and independence. Ten years older, set in his ways, he knew he'd play his professorial authoritarian role from time to time. And when he did, he hoped she'd bring him back down to earth. But, if they were to succeed in rescuing Jerry, she must adopt the right attitude, one of total commitment to the rescue mission.

"Hey," she said, waving her hand in front of his face, "I think I lost you for a minute. Anything else I should know about this jungle adventure?"

"Like I told you last night at dinner, it takes three to four days to get to the other side of the island. We'll be traveling by canoe most of the time—there's one portage. No large animals live on the island, just a few jaguars. Tapirs and monkeys are harmless, even the denizens of the river won't bother you unless you bother them."

“You make the trip sound like such a lark. But to tell you the truth, I’m scared shitless, Professor.”

Sitting at the helm of the dugout, he indicated a wooden seat near the bow. She quickly settled in, leaning back against her personal gear, and he watched as she wrapped herself up in the exuberance and explosive nature of the rainforest birds. Magnificently colored red, blue and yellow parrots, with their downward curving beaks, swooped over them and squawked like shrews as they made their raucous sociable ventures out of the gloomy forest. A luxurious panorama, totally rainforest. Lush, green and moist. His world.

For an hour or so, the boat churned steadily through the shallow current. When it catapulted into a stronger current, Elejandro quickly maneuvered the boat into calmer waters. Not long after, he slowed the boat as he directed it into a narrow tributary. Without asking her to do it, Robina gauged the depth of the water, and then began to brush aside encroaching tree branches with a long pole.

Later, when the canoe plowed through churned up silt, thick, slimy and latte-colored water, his passenger grabbed the pole and helped him veer the canoe deeper into the channel. Amazed by her pizzazz, he found her ability to take the initiative without any fanfare a sterling quality. Hellishly admirable. Struck by her moxie, a primal desire surfaced and a shot of heat raced through his veins. Shoving it back, he silently cursed the animal within.

For the past three years, he lived in a world without women. Now he hungered to touch this female's soft skin, not as a doctor, but as a lover. He longed to play with the pink tips of her breasts, explore her taut belly and rest his head between her thighs. *Get over yourself.* No way would he make this long, sweaty and tiresome trip more stressful for her than it had to be.

The amount of light filtering through the trees had diminished until it was nearly dark. Vines grew up and tried to strangle trees that were already covered with other plants. Watching her reaction to the rainforest surroundings calmed his savage beast's urge to come out and play. Wildly curious about the biological web of life in the jungle, she wrapped the wilderness around her like a lover's arms. If he valued his sanity, he'd follow her lead, and forget about wrapping himself up in her scent, feel and touch.

"This is just unbelievable," she said, when the river narrowed. "It's so dark in here."

"The plants are all in a struggle to reach sunlight. The tall trees don't branch out till they reach about two hundred feet, so they stop much of the light from reaching the ground." Cutting the motor, he caused the boat to make a sharp left hand turn. Jumping into the marsh, he waded toward shore. "Those dark clouds and the heavy humidity mean rain. Let's set up a shelter right here.

"Rainfall's a constant throughout the year. So you might feel sluggish

because of the humidity. The air gets thick and clammy, but as your body adjusts to it, it'll excite and energize you.”

Sucking in the moist air and pungent smells of the rainforest vegetation, he cut down four poles with his machete, lifted them upright and pounded them down into the compacted silt. After setting the tarp over the framework, he stretched mosquito netting down the sides of the shelter and secured two hammocks to the poles.

Robina helped him set out some roasted tapir, fried plantains and beans on a large slab of wood. Sitting down on a pile of palm leaves, they dug in. With genuine surprise, unexpected warmth surged through Elejandro as he watched her wolf down food completely foreign to her. Last night, she'd told him she'd been brought up on a Wyoming buffalo ranch. So her routine life must've promised security in the future—probably a tradition in her family, carried on for decades. As a cowgirl who rode horses and rounded up buffalo, the animals' strength, musk and hot energy must've poured through her. And now, far off the beaten track, the fates brought her to him and an island jungle full of rare and endangered wildlife.

With the shoulders and powerful muscular legs of an athlete, full firm breasts, and sensual flaring hips, she caused his heart to roll over in his chest. Something in the way her feline eyes darted about hinted at a heightened animal intuition. He'd read about an American Indian shaman who'd shape shifted into a

buffalo. By doing so, he honored the animal that supplied him with the necessities of life.

Maybe Robina had heard of those legends and myths. Maybe she owned an animal psychic sense, but never gave it a chance to surface. Almost sure her power animal prowled inside her spirit and longed to be recognized, he wondered if the jungle setting would encourage it to claw its way out.

Robina glanced up to where the rain pelted down on the roof. “Do we have any weapons? You said Gunther’s men carried guns.”

Removing his machete from his backpack, he performed a few goofy ninja swipes and lunges. “I’ll make do with this until I get hold of a gun.”

Chapter Two

Robina shot him a withering glance as she continued to wolf down the rest of her beans. “You said the rain lasts for about two hours, right?” If the rain lasted for two hours, they’d be on their way in under an hour.

“Usually, but you never know, it might last longer.”

In any case, it was long enough for her to release a little tension. The sixty-something Scottish cook, Sheena Colquhoun, who fed the wranglers on her parent’s buffalo ranch, once worked as a psychic in Louisiana. Before leaving the south, she’d picked up an endless supply of comical Southern expressions. “Smack my ass and call me Sally,” was Robina’s favorite, and she’d taken ownership of that phrase and many others.

They’d often spent their evenings together while Sheena tried to teach her how to awaken her sixth sense. And, surprising the hell out of herself, she’d finally acquired some telepathic powers. By actively focusing on a particular person, especially when they were in the same vicinity, she could pick up on his or her thoughts.

A short while later, Elejandro relaxed in his hammock, not more than five

feet away from where she rested. He faced her with his eyes closed, and sure enough, his thoughts were focused on her. So she decided to play one of her sex games. Relaxed and comfortable, she lay back in her hammock and concentrated on him.

The intriguing plant chemist epitomized the adventurous men she'd read about in her teens. As she'd lain on the mat in his herbal hut yesterday morning, every stroke of his fingers acted like a drug. Holding the image of his powerful hands in her mind, she pretended those skilled expert fingers, once again, dug into her arm muscles with thorough precision. Soon a tactile sexual smorgasbord began to build as she continued to mentally exercise her rich imagination.

As she continued to expand her sex fantasy, her thoughts drifted into wondrous territory. The island and the herbal doctor were left behind as her imaginary romp intensified. Scene after scene of titillating flights of fancy increased the tension in her groin and soon mounted to the point where a sweet release washed away the apprehension and fear brought on by her chilling brush with death.



The next morning, Elejandro sat at the helm of the canoe and Robina, once again, lounged against her backpacks facing him. While they'd rested on their hammocks in the late afternoon yesterday, he'd been able to penetrate her psychic

shield. Finding she'd telepathically read his thoughts, he'd prepared to resist her psychic intrusion. But then she flew off into a fantasy world of her own. She'd opened herself up to a sexual experience. Her psychic presence and her telepathic skills shook him right down to his primitive core. In the future, if she ever learned to project herself into astral form and imagined them coming together in a spirit form of sex, she could be assured of his active participation.

As the canoe powered them down the river, he thought of the strengthened square stern built to accommodate the forty horsepower motor. The sturdy craft, key to their survival, would be sorely tested as they made their way through the rapids, eddies and strong currents that made up the dangerous river highway. The sweltering harsh environment of the jungle demanded consideration, too. Mentally checking the list of stuff he'd brought along with them, he wondered if he'd forgotten something important. Besides the fruit, fish and animals they'd catch along the way, he'd brought along enough rice, beans, corn flour, oil, cheese and water for a couple of weeks. A tarp, two hammocks, mosquito netting, a machete, binoculars, four changes of shirts and pants and two headlamps should cover all the other bases.

Following some tricky maneuvers between thick green landing pads and floating logs, he cut the engine. "The canoe's bogged down in this swamp. So you'll have to get out and push. I'll get a paddle and try to stab a sunken tree trunk for

leverage.”

Robina climbed over the side and jumped into the warm muck of vines, mulch and fallen trees. “I’ve found a tree and I feel like I’m walking on water,” she blurted out as she began to push the canoe through the thick gooey mire.

“We should be out of this mess very soon. In another few hours, we’ll stop and set up camp for the night.” He wondered when the time would be right for telling her about his ability to shape change. Soon, he hoped. They planned on outwitting twenty-four thugs and their boss, so allowing his animal spirit to run free a few times loomed as a given. Would she be shocked and appalled when she found out about the beast behind his façade?

“Sounds good to me. The muck in the river is making it impossible to see anything below my waist. How do I know if I’m going to be eaten by piranhas?”

“You have no cuts, so you’ll be fine.” He worked the paddle, staying in sync with her pushes. Shortly after the canoe moved out of the muck, and Robina jumped back inside the boat, the river narrowed. Not a beach in sight, just tall, muddy rust-colored cliffs closing in on them. Later on, he managed to guide the canoe through a series of rapids and eddies, but when a strong current sent them hurtling along with unbelievable speed, he failed to steer the boat all the way around a huge log. Hit broadside, the boat tipped and teetered and, to make matters worse, the engine stalled. It was completely flooded, so he was forced to

paddle against the current for over an hour.

After the engine had dried out, they chugged along in calmer waters, Elejandro worried about the searing afternoon heat boring down on his redheaded companion. “Keep slathering on the sunscreen, young lady. If you don’t, you’re going to get charred like meat on a barbeque.”

The adventurous backpacker, like him, loved the outdoors and running with the animals. But she didn’t have the kind of skin that tanned easily, and yet the sun, wind and weather somehow succeeded in giving her skin a light brown glow. Last night, she’d spoken of helping vets to deliver the babies of the ranch animals from time to time. She also cared for the animals’ injuries, particularly those of the horses. The more he learned about the busy life she led, the more he realized that she’d be a perfect fit for a job at his research compound. Dream on, Professor!



In the late afternoon, they caught sight of an abandoned hut sitting on a deforested area about fifty feet up a small incline. He cut the engine, jumped into the water and pulled the boat onto the beach.

Robina, exhausted, filthy and starving, heaved a sigh and shrugged her shoulders in resignation when she reached the shelter. On the plus side, it contained a large platform bed raised two feet off the ground, but it appeared to need just as much work to set up as a lean-to.

After removing the old palm leaves from the bed, her next job involved recovering it with fresh ones. Wandering into the jungle, she fumed over the professor's cavalier attitude when she risked her life in the mucky river. Hacking away at the fronds like some shrewish housewife, she muttered to herself. "You'll be fine. You'll be fine." *Just do it. Just do it.* Dammit, those creepy piranhas could've eaten her alive if she'd cut herself on a rock or broken branch. But that didn't happen; there'd been no spilling of blood. So why was she getting so pissed off with Elejandro?

Well cover me with eggs and flour and bake me for forty minutes! Look at what she was doing now. Surrounded by stalking animals, overhanging poisonous snakes and ravenous bugs, she... Stopping for a minute after she placed more leaves onto the pile, she looked around.

Dim light shone through a small gap in the trees above, and she suddenly found herself totally disoriented. Under the jungle canopy, the jungle floor received little light at the best of times. And now, in the late afternoon, with the sun setting behind the trees, she experienced heart-stopping fear.

Like an insignificant dot in a vast green ocean, completely overwhelmed and awed by the insane abundance of luxuriant vegetation, she doubled back a couple of times. Earlier on, she tried to memorize the shapes of the shallowly rooted trees. But they all looked the same to her now. Without any kind of a signpost to guide

her, the wildlife shrieked at her. Parrots sent down raucous messages from high in the canopy, and mosquitoes came out in full force. Shadows were everywhere. She felt stifled and claustrophobic.

Just when she thought she'd wind up buried in the bowels of the jungle after the bees, spiders and wasps terrorized her and army ants chomped away at her innards, she heard Elejandro call her name. The sound of his voice set her in the right direction, but no way would she go back for those palm leaves. The all-knowing professor with his unerring ability to navigate the jungle would have no problem finding them.

Later, as they sat on the bed platform and dined on the four white piranhas he'd caught, Elejandro patted his stomach. "Rice and squash served in a banana leaf with my freshly caught fish—talk about fancy dining. It doesn't get any better."

"Nasty little buggers, those toothy little piranhas. You probably noticed one of them jumped into the boat today. When its razor-sharp teeth grabbed onto the pole I use for gauging depths, I dipped it into the water, and kept it there until the ferocious little beast gave up trying to take a bite out of it. They're fish from hell. Cannibals, too. It's the stuff of nightmares! I saw the bites they took out of their brothers while they struggled on your line."

"And out of me, too. I nearly lost a finger as I unhooked them."

Unable to keep her eyes off his powerful shoulders, forearms and rock-hard biceps, she hungered to have him take a deep journey into her body where her shifting and coiling muscles waited to ensnare him. His smell intrigued and excited her and she longed to get closer to him and breathe in the strange foreign scents mixed with his natural musk. One minute, she berated him for being a bloody tyrant, and now, just like a piranha, her body cried out for a piece of him.

“Well, I’m off to the river,” she said, as she pulled a towel and a bathing suit out of her backpack.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come along?”

“No. I’ve got my flashlight. I’ll be fine. Once I wash this mud off, I’ll be right back.”

As she plodded along in the spongy leaf-covered trail, she thought of the stingrays down in the depths of the river. Their poisonous punctures were not only extremely painful and slow to heal, they left big scars on their victims, too. Tough headhunters were known to break down and cry from the pain of one of those lances.

The two other water lovers the doc mentioned last night made her shiver involuntarily. Electric eels delivered deadly shocks, and the parasitic toothpick fish climbed into men’s urethras and camped out in their kidneys. And what about the anacondas with their hundred teeth? Did they really grow as big as a canoe like

medicine man Elejandro had said?

Wading into the water, she stared at the impenetrable unbroken green wall off to the right. Only a narrow bank of brownish soil separated her from the animals foraging, living and dying in the overgrown and intertwined jungle. Were they monitoring and reporting her every move from behind the green curtain? Was it too farfetched for her to imagine a jaguar sliding down from the thick jungle canopy? How would the animal react when it picked up her scent?

Everything surrounding her— fish, animal, river and jungle— came across as steroid-enhanced. Between her and an early death stood a strong and knowledgeable herbalist. Magical and unassuming with golden, emerald-flecked eyes glowing with an inner secretive knowledge, he embodied the jungle and the ebb and flow of the river.

As she slid her hands over her body and wiped away the mud and sweat, she continued to direct her thoughts to Elejandro. Canceling out his annoying “just do it” approach when throwing her into treacherous canoe maneuvers, she made him an object of considerable curiosity and lustfulness. In the boat today, when he’d first taken off his shirt, she’d longed to touch the defined ridges and dells of his chest. An incredible aura of sensuality took over her body. She tried to keep her mind from wandering into wondrous territory, but it proved impossible. The guy was hot. Barefooted and bare-chested, she found him a joy to observe. To discover

the magical taste of the nectar that formed when their tongues intertwine—she must, at the very least, take that memory home with her.

She'd been married to a man who hated the isolation of the buffalo ranch. Three years ago, they'd divorced. Since then, she'd experienced only a couple of inconsequential sexual encounters. So, in a wild unpredictable turn of events, when a lonely botanist sent out invisible sensual waves, her response came as no surprise. More than ready to be thrust into a potential maelstrom of unspoken and untested delights, her body roared, "Bring it on."

Risking her heart by having sex with an enigmatic doctor, who searched for plant cures in the rainforest, rated as a harmless activity. Writing a new romantic chapter to her life was long overdue. So yes, the thought of a little close body action with the stunningly virile hunk—and at the earliest opportunity—gave her unscheduled island trip a thrilling aspect. Anticipation about exciting scenarios that might await her up ahead—what better way to put a positive spin on the journey?



When Robina arrived back at the hut after her trip to the river, blood rushed to Elejandro's head, and his legs threatened to crumble. Her swimsuit, a couple of tiny pieces of material, barely covered the essentials. Long thick red curly hair freed of its constraints, wide green eyes, a pouty mouth and a strong well-

shaped body that moved with a feline's certainty of body coordination, caused his heart to thump and his hands to sweat.

What an evocative sight—seductive, and so damn stunning. It sent a powerful message to his nether regions, and he longed to coax her into pressing up against him and allowing his hands to run over her breasts and down to her hips. He wanted to search around between her thighs. His hand would cup her nest of soft reddish curls before he slid a finger along her cleft of delicate flesh. Then his lips would move in and get lost in her scent and taste.

Pleasurable waves of melting, burning heat initiated a buzz. His muscles grew taut and the slick heat threatened to spread into his groin. Before his erection took over for his brain, he got up and stood well back from her. Maybe, before she left the island, he'd get a chance to experience a real fusion of their spirits.

And whatever strange or dangerous situations dogged them in Luizao, he planned on watching her back. Whatever it took to keep her safe, he'd do it. She trusted him, and for that, he felt thankful. So what if he found out she wasn't destined to be his even for a short while? As an entirely different species than humans, he must prepare himself for disappointment.



The next morning, when they were forced to portage around some rapids, Robina held up the stern of the canoe. The herbal doc held up the bow in one hand

and swished his machete in incredibly economical movements with the other. He didn't so much hack at the branches and plants, as he brushed them aside. Like magic, they snapped back into position after they passed by. Powerful and compelling, his fearless and decisive energy washed over Robina as he sniffed, listened and called out to the animals. By copying the movements he performed in front of her, she didn't trip over fallen tree trunks or get tangled up in too many giant roots.

The temperature hovered around seventy-five degrees with intense humidity. The heavy energy on the forest floor, where the ferns and mosses thrived, grew thick and clammy. But, as the all-knowing doc said, she'd gradually find his world of speckled light, endless shadows and creature-sounds less and less alien. But, getting more in sync with the rhythm of the rainforest took time.

Thrilled when her sense of smell became more and more intense, she enjoyed the plants and the different odors they flaunted. Breathing in deeply, she absorbed the sweet-sour vegetable-like aromas of the coca bushes and the rich loamy smell of the earth after the rain. Fruit trees gave off their dark spicy odors, and the flowers pollinated by the bees smelled fruity and sweet. Some plants sent out a rotten meat odor; attracting flies being their sole mission in life.

Butterflies, tree frogs, insects, mammals, snakes and the brightly colored birds high up above the canopy gave her permission to travel through their private

wilderness. So no way would she walk through it deaf, dumb and blind.

Capuchin monkeys made a terrible racket as they passed under a hundred-foot capirona tree. By shaking, rattling and rolling, they tried to scare away the human interlopers. At one point, she pulled away from a stream of pee headed in her direction, thereby jerking the boat unceremoniously. “Yuck. Stop that! Stop that!”

“Hey, take it easy. Those monkeys are showing us how pleased they are to see us.”

“What rude little buggers!” One of the perverts picked that moment to jump on her back in order to inspect the redheaded foreigner. Letting out a few choice cuss words, she tried to shake him off.

Monkey-lover let out a booming laugh. “Lower the boat! Lower the boat!”

“Okay! Okay!”

As she freed herself of the young primate’s attentions, monkeys off in the distance responded to Elejandro’s laugh with a chorus of hooting. Seconds later, she heard a roar that caused adrenaline to rush through her body in a sickening wave. *Sweet mango jelly!* Taking in a deep shuddering breath, her arms circled Elejandro in a fierce embrace. “Cripes! That can’t be a lion!”

“Not in this neck of the woods. They’re just the basso screams of the harmless howler monkeys...the ones with the red bodies and the black faces.

They're trying to intimidate us." He cheekily drew her even closer. Pushing his hard body against hers, he captured her eyes with his piercing golden gaze.

"Well, they're doing a damn good job." She pulled back. Her cheeks burned, but not from embarrassment. The doc represented the personification of temptation and she gave no thought to reining in her feelings.

"Come over here and have a drink of this water." Cutting through a thick vine with his machete, he drank some of the liquid that poured out. Then he moved aside.

Bathed in perspiration, she took the vine from him. After slurping up the liquid like a dried up desert plant, she collected some in her cupped hands and wiped it over her face and neck. "It tastes just like ordinary water, deliciously refreshing." When she handed the vine to him, she found herself on the receiving end of his weighty stare. Shuddering with desire, heat raced through her body. Feeling as steamy as the jungle and as predatory as a jaguar stalking prey, she lost herself in his musky scent. Finding him lethal to her self-control, she forgot to breathe.

What was going on? Allowing herself to melt under the hot golden fierceness of his eyes—not the wisest course to take when she hardly knew the man. Why didn't she worry about the repercussions after they went their separate ways? Her intuitive inner voice sent out a warning: by caring too much for this

man, she might be led down a path to pain and misgivings. *Hell's bells and buckets of blood!* If she passed up a chance to connect with this intriguing researcher, she knew she'd regret it for the rest of her life.

No second thoughts surfaced. She gave her body permission to go wherever it damn well wanted whenever Elejandro stirred up sinful vibes. His large, powerful body, the sheer perfection of his physique and the way his muscles bunched under his skin represented every erotic fantasy she'd ever created all wrapped up into one. A few men exposed their bodies to her in the past, but they never compared in any way with this magnificent specimen.

Raising one of his heavy eyebrows, he gave her a lopsided grin. "I can't tell you how many times this vine has brought me back from the brink of death." With that, he threw his head back and chug-a-lugged.

Once the canoe sat in the water and Elejandro tied it securely to a tree, his face clouded with uneasiness. "We've already used up three days. So let's hurry back and get the rest of the stuff. It'll take two more trips."

"Right behind you."

On reaching the start of the portage, where shallow water splashed over exposed rocks, Robina picked up their backpacks, and Elejandro grabbed the motor. As they hiked back to the canoe, she accidentally picked up on his thoughts. A sick fiery rage gnawed away inside his head. "What on earth did Jerry

do to draw Gunther's attention? Do you have any idea?"

"No"—he took in a quick breath of surprise, as if remembering her ability to read his mind—"to think he might've killed Jerry. Damn it to hell, I can't seem to shake the fearful images building in my imagination."

Twenty minutes later, when they reached the canoe with their equipment, hundreds of tiny bees suddenly attacked Robina. As they frantically licked the sweat off her neck and face, the tickling sensation almost drove her crazy. As more and more of them fought for a place to land on her exposed skin, she waved her hands around wildly. That didn't work, so she grabbed the jacket wrapped around her waist and began to strike out at them. "Damn it, Elejandro, how do I get rid of these besotted bees?"

"Your perspiration's enticed them into a buzzing frenzy. But they are stingless bees so they are harmless to humans. Just ignore them."

Robina grumbled under her breath. *Just do it! Just do it.* "Easier said than done, Mr. Cool." Her pants were shoved inside her socks, so her ankles were safe. But one bee found a way down her neck and a few others followed. They grew furious when they failed to find a way out, and the torture exceeded Robina's tolerance level. *Shit fire and save matches!* The brilliant researcher forgot to tell her that these tiny bees bite when they're trapped. Harmless, my foot. What if she was allergic to them?

“Mantan tus pantalones bien puestos while we make a hasty retreat,” her jungle guide said, as they headed back for the rest of their stuff.

“Keep my pants on! Stay calm! What a bloody pain in the ass you are! I’m not panicking over something trivial. Besides, I don’t see any bugs torturing you. You’ve built up an immunity to those jungle critters’ bites, haven’t you? So listen up, Doc. Your refusal to see that I’m under attack is pissing me off. If you can’t be more sensitive, I’m going to climb that tree and join those monkeys. And when I throw those half-eaten bananas at you, I won’t miss.”

Elejandro burst out laughing, and for some crazy reason the warm sound calmed her and made her feel safe. Go figure. Shortly after, the bees instinctively realized they were too far away from their established territory, and flew off. “Yeah! What a relief! No more torture.”

“Great. When we get to the canoe, cover yourself with mosquito netting.”

Chapter Three

At dawn the next morning, Robina got up from the bed of palm leaves they'd made the night before. With Elejandro sound asleep, she quietly slipped off her shirt and pants and headed for the river.

The discordant choruses of the frogs and crickets gave way to the sounds of the birds, and Black Spider and Woolly monkeys replaced the night monkeys. The rotting, strong-smelling palm tree fruit on the ground contributed to the scent-drenched environs. Looking up, she saw a group of monkeys stuffing themselves with the fermenting fruit. From the way some of the other monkeys were acting, she assumed they were drunk. They were draped over the branch; some were even able to hold themselves up and swing by their tails, totally out of it. The sun peeked through the trees and, all in all, the main activities of the day were in full progress. So she shoved aside lingering thoughts about yesterday's frustrating bee attack and made up her mind to do a little swinging, too. *Jam up and jelly tight*. It'd be great if the doc was in a mood to hang loose and soak up some of this wild untamed playfulness.

Sitting by the river, she covered herself in clay and mud. When her naked

companion emerged from the forest, she cursed herself for slapping on the guck. Rats. This was no way for her to seduce the gorgeous hunk. “I’m quite a sight, aren’t I? I couldn’t get back to sleep because the bites on my body are so darn itchy.”

“Wash yourself off, and I’ll smear them with some of this sap. He set the jar of medicine aside and beckoned her to join him in the water.

A little while ago, a couple of caimans, crocodilian reptiles, swam in the water close by. Their red glowing beady eyes stared up at her making her feel uneasy. Cannibals, they’d eat each other if they were hungry enough. A family of otters now replaced them, and were busily spraying the river bank, marking their territory. But the chance of those caimans taking another dip prevented her from totally relaxing.

Standing thigh-deep in the water, she feverishly ran her hands over her abdomen, shedding the layer of clay. “I’d like to stay here all day. I feel like I’m one with the creatures swimming around me.” She lied. The eels, anacondas, caimans and piranhas weren’t to be trusted. *Well, slap the dawg and spit in the fahr. There I go again.* For God’s sake it was time to get over her irrational fears. Her all-knowing jungle guide told her over and over again: the creatures lurking beneath this life-giving fluid were the least of her problems. Standing in front of her, Elejandro took her by the shoulders. “Now kneel down and I’ll wash your hair.”

With his breath on her neck and his hands vigorously rubbing her scalp, Robina suddenly realized how quickly she'd bowed down before him. The man was untapped power personified, and she wished he'd push some of that magical energy into her.

Gradually feeling more revitalized as the water flowed over her head and shoulders, she relaxed. Vulnerable, available and open, the blockade protecting her old boundaries came crashing down. As well, thoughts of being in enemy territory pitted against a ruthless man's gang of enforcers faded away.

Goose bumps formed all over her body, and not from the cool water. Her imagination rushed along like a maple leaf on a windy day, and she longed to get lost in the herbal doctor's extraordinary mysterious aura. His damp, musky scent mystified her, and she yearned to trace it to its source.

Tousling her hair, he stood up. "Okay, all done. Let's get out of the water and I'll tend to your bites."

Robina leaned against a nearby tree, and he covered her body in ointment—not only the back of her neck, but her arms and legs, too. Then he cut a fleshy leaf from an aloe plant and showed her how to slice the leaf lengthwise and scoop out the gel.

"You heal amazingly well. Your bumps and bruises are fading very quickly."

"It was your magic potion, Doctor. Make sure you save the formula."

Mission accomplished, mystical herbalist, she thought wryly. Dressed in a way perfectly natural for him, he sported his birthday suit. In this land of jungle symphonies made up of the chirps, hums and buzzes, he didn't need to wrap himself up in anything other than his precious rainforest. But she did. Without clothes, prickly palms, a hundred times pricklier than rose bushes, would turn her into a pincushion. And, as for those bad-tempered black ants on steroids, they were just waiting for the chance to bite the hell out of her.

The air, already humid and heavy with the smell of the decomposing leaves on the forest floor, seemed to thicken even more. When he crushed his chest against her breasts and pushed his heavy erection against her mound, her pubic area clenched and throbbed with delicious sensation. She teetered off balance. Using the tree for support, she wondered if she'd ever be able to peel away the many layers of his makeup. How to reach the core of him puzzled her to no end. She encouraged Elejandro to take her place against the tree. Kissing, nipping and nibbling, she made her way down his chest and belly. Sliding her fingers along the quivering length of him, she replaced those appendages with her mouth. Working on the head of his penis, she licked and massaging with a wide tongue. As she alternately bobbed her head up and down the upper part and then took him in deep, the thought of accidentally scoring his sensitive organ with her teeth made her shudder. She didn't want him running off yelling and screaming, afraid she'd

confused his silken penis with a popsicle. Actually, anything involving the fine line between pain and pleasure was out.

Three years ago, right after her ex-husband started delivering a few jarring slaps to her face during sex, she'd divorced him. Even before that, sex with him had always been stressful. She hadn't enjoyed the taste of the guy and always removed his penis from her mouth when he'd ejaculated. As for wrecking Elejandro's orgasm, no way. She might spit some of his jizm out after he ejaculated, but his rush of lust, heat and desire weren't to be distracted in any way.

Reaching down, Elejandro grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her up to face him. "It's my turn now, lovely one."

Once he had her backed against the tree, he pushed her arms above her head, and began to lick and tug at her lips, her ears and the hollow of her neck. Slipping down to her breasts—*choose me! choose me!*— his mouth worked on one of her nipples. As it stiffened and rose to a hard peak, veins of pleasure, hot and steamy, spiraled down into her pelvis. In her feminine core more juices were released, and she became aware of the wetness between her thighs. Kneeling down in the soft squishy undergrowth, his fingers stimulated her cleft and then took her labia in his mouth and sucked, rolled and pulled. Giving herself over to him with reckless, sensual abandon, she felt bewitched. Enchanted. Spellbound. His charisma, rich and complex, scalded her and she wondered if the oxygen-rich jungle caused that

spill of heat to transfer itself from him to her.

When his tongue sought out the slick moist flesh at the entrance to her sex and speared in and out, holding back on the brilliant rush of heat proved almost impossible. But she didn't want her release to slam into her just yet. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she put some strength into her push. When he lay flat on his back in the thick leafy groundcover, she came down on top of him.

She didn't ask him why he didn't put on a condom. Somewhere in his medicine hut there must be an herbal mixture he'd especially concocted to keep him free of disease. On the pill, she kept up her end, too.

Giving in to the tide of longing she'd suppressed for far too long, she placed his penis at the portal it searched for and rode him slowly at first. Gradually increasing the tempo, she soon slammed onto him like a woman possessed. Over and over again, she slid up and down the length of him as sensations swamped her. Pleasure spread throughout her body, up her spine to her very brainstem. Operating on another plane, her belly tightened, and the muscles in her legs and thighs trembled. Her shivers and gasps were soon followed by a long drawn-out ecstatic moan as she drowned in bliss.

When her aftershocks died down, Elejandro's arms circled her body, and he gently rolled her back onto the ground. Rocketing into her, deeper, ever deeper, his hardened flesh flexed and swelled. Arching her back, Robina, spouting gibberish,

melted and burned as she responded once again. When he exploded, he increased her arousal to the point where she experienced another orgasm. She remained joined to her wild scientist until she saw a wild pig sniffing around the humans' play area.

The first two-hours of the canoe trip that morning proved uneventful until the river narrowed. Then Elejandro pressed her into service because the boat faltered in a log-jammed swamp-like section. Stepping out of the boat and into the cold water, she found her high rubber boots not nearly high enough.

To make matters worse, the boat swayed from side to side, dangerously close to taking on water. "Try to keep the boat steady!" she roared.

"Maldito, maldito...not possible."

"Curses to you, too." Pushing and pulling in turns, completely exhausted, she was finally able to guide the tipsy canoe out of the clogged swamp.

Back in the canoe, she heard Elejandro mumbling curses and the motor went silent. "What now?"

"The current is moving the boat. I have no control. So there's probably a drop off up ahead."

Robina barely had time to tighten her grip on the sides of the canoe before it was thrown over a mini-waterfall. Losing her hold on the boat, she tumbled into the water. "Cripes!" she croaked, after she surfaced and spit out a mouthful of

water. “Those damn tree trunks are lethal weapons!”

When she grabbed the side of the boat and struggled to get back into the canoe, Elejandro balanced the boat by leaning in the opposite direction. Kicking her feet as hard as she could, she pulled herself up, grabbed the opposite side and turned her body so her bum would land on the floor. Haggard and mud-drenched, choking and struggling for air, she climbed into her seat. Covered in slime, she took off her clothes, wiped herself down, covered herself in her mentor’s magic bug and sunscreen lotion and got into dry clothes.

“Are you okay, young lady? Ready to soldier on?”

“Fine.” But she didn’t feel fine. With her body under attack, she felt like a punching bag. Trailing her hand into the river debris of branches, vines and mulch floating on the surface a few inches below the gunwale, she tried to squelch her “poor me” crap.

When the wind suddenly started up and waves splashed into the canoe, her pleasant train of thought derailed. She reached for the pans at the far end of the boat and began to bail as fast as humanly possible. Gasping for breath as the stiff winds blasted hard rain into her face, she felt incredibly wretched and dog-tired. Adding to her misery, the boat rocked and rolled in the choppy water. “Shouldn’t we pull over?” she yelled.

“We’re fine. Relax. Keep baling.”

Once again, her pilot didn't give a damn about her aches and pains and she found him irritating and insensitive. *Just do it! Just do it!* He pushed too hard and she felt mutinous. Enough with the same old professorial methodology, Professor. Damn it, just when she needed some tender mercies earlier on, he'd flipped into his authoritarian act. Following her fall into the drink, his comforting words turned out to be, "Ready to soldier on?" And, when the boat came close to sinking and scooping out buckets of water brought her close to exhaustion, what advice did he give her? "Relax. Keep baling." His university students probably let him get away with that crap and treated him like some kind of savior. Yuck, teachers and their God-like complexes.

As a jungle survivor, the guy exuded tremendous spirit and navigated this world with insight and reverence. And as a lover... *Meu Deus...* only this morning they burned into each other's body—every muscle, sinew and bone. But now she felt like he lacked sensitivity. He'd left her feeling inadequate, not up to the job. This was his world, not hers.

During their portage exercise, Elejandro had showed her some plants that were able to protect themselves from bacteria and viruses. And human diseases were similar to the ones that affected plants, so he made those psychoactive plants his healing allies, his friends. Some of them were capable of curing man's worst diseases. He even talked to them. My God, she lusted for a guy who valued his

relationship with plants over human ones.

Jerked back to cold reality, Robina took off her broad-brimmed straw hat, slapped it against her pants and did some venting. It seemed like her clothes were always wet. On the third, “Damn it all to hell and back. Bloody hell!” she grabbed her stomach and leaned over the gunwale to retch.

Elejandro bent forward. “Hey, there. You swallowed some turbid water, eh?”

She nodded and continued to cough and gag. Immediately steering the canoe into a tiny inlet that cut into the jungle, he tied it up.

When he saw Robina holding her hands over her mouth, he yanked on her arm. “Don’t hold back on vomiting. It clears the body of anything poisonous.”

She groaned and erupted with another stream of guck. “I think a snake bit me on the leg as we portaged yesterday. I felt a tiny sharp pain, looked down and saw a small snake slither away.”

“Can you describe it?”

“Grayish, with darker stripes.”

He shook his head dolefully as he helped her out of the canoe. Fear, dark and glaring flashed in his eyes. “Did the pain grow? Did it flow up your leg?”

“No. It really didn’t bother me till today.”

Returning a few minutes later, he showed her a stem. “This jaraca plant looks like the jaraca snake. That might’ve been the one that bit you. It’s an

antidote. Luckily, it grows year round.” Taking his knife, he placed the stem on a log and chopped it up. Then, putting it in a small bowl of cold water, he handed it to his patient. “Eat this. Then I’ll put some inside a banana leaf and wrap it around the bite area. You don’t have much swelling, so you probably didn’t get much venom.”

When they were seated on a log on the beach, he glanced over at her. “I’ll change the poultice every two hours, but it’s up to you to eat more of the chopped-up jaraca tuber every four hours. The canoe isn’t the best way to travel from now on. We need a raft. We’ll set up a small shelter on it and a place to cook. Then we’ll tie the canoe to the raft.”

“You’re doing it all for me, aren’t you? Damn it, I’m slowing you down. We planned on staking out Luizao tomorrow.”

“Not at all. This is as good a time as any to build a raft. We’ll be staying on it while we scope out the village.”

“I’ll get the palm leaves and make the roof.” No snake bite would put her on the sidelines. She’d show him she had spunk even if it killed her.

“Don’t stray too far from the beach. You won’t be able to see more than eight feet ahead of you in the thick foliage. I’ll collect some balsa logs and lash them together.”

A little over an hour later, her personal herbal practitioner drove six hard

wooden stakes into the eight soft balsa logs he'd strapped together with vines. After weaving a thatched roof, she helped him prop it on top of the stakes. Following that, she wove more palm leaves to be used as the sides of the shelter.

When a mattress of palm leaves covered the reeds of grass that made up the first layer of the bed, she threw their backpacks into the tiny shelter. The cooking area was to be in the middle of the raft, so she helped Elejandro gather a bunch of flat stones and place them over the logs. While he made a small tent over them, she collected some driftwood for the fire and two sturdy branches to serve as a paddle.

After shoving off, Elejandro made sure the raft drifted down the middle of the river and stayed clear of the fallen trees and vines near the shore.

Under the shelter, Robina removed her wet clothes and spread mocura, a variety of false garlic with a penetrating odor, all over her body. According to Elejandro, it would raise her energy level. But he didn't have to tell her to put her own internal healing energies to work as well.

Quickly getting more of the jaraca juice down her burning throat, she took an anti-viral medicine.

The following morning the weather turned blustery, but Elejandro managed to keep the raft in the middle of the river. Robina sat on the bed of palm leaves covered in two thick woolen blankets. Her clothes were fresh and dry. After she'd washed them, she'd placed them on top of the small tent over the stove. With the

swelling in her leg less pronounced and no sign of a fever, she breathed easier. Even baby jaraca bites could be deadly.

As the raft drifted down the river, she wished she had a camera. Sociable, intelligent Macaws squawked their heads off, and docile dolphins—as pink as the shrimp they fed on—breeched, blew and dove as they checked out the raft. The blue butterflies and dragonflies followed them for miles and eased her apprehension about what lay ahead.

Later, when the wind died down and the current remained calm, the raft drifted along down the middle of the river without the need for paddling, so Elejandro joined her for a late lunch on the bed under the shelter. “Judging from the size of the team Gunther’s assembled,” he said, as he ate his fruit salad of bananas and mangoes, “I’m sure he’s up to more than forcing the villagers to pan for gold.”

She offered an exasperated shrug. “Gunther sounds like he’s capable of anything.”

“We’re in a tough situation here. So I need to give you a quick rundown on my ability to shape shift. I walk with jaguar’s medicine, and I’m guided by his power. That’s why I’m able to blend in with the jungle...why insects, snakes and bugs don’t bother me. To succeed in routing Gunther from the island, my jaguar’s skills at stalking and patience plus his killing power are indispensable.”

She felt the color drain from her face. Warning pangs of primitive alarm erupted inside her brain. *Well. I'll be hornswoggled!* “Hold on there! You’re able to change your body into a jaguar’s. Unbelievable! That’s like turning straw into gold!”

“I’ve frightened you, haven’t I?”

“Well, yeah.” She drew in a shuddering sharp breath, whirled around to face him and made no effort to hide her shock and impotent fear. “Cripes, what did you expect?” She crawled out of bed, stood in front of him and placed her arms akimbo. “What am I supposed to say? What else is new?” She thought about gender crossings and blendings and how they were common to people everywhere. Everyone shape shifted in one way or the other, but she knew Elejandro’s human to animal feat carried the ability to the absolute extreme.

“Try not to panic; I desperately need your help.” His expression was taut, his eyes level under furrowed brows. “You’re looking at me as if I’m a polluted creature, a corrupting influence.”

Flashing him a withering stare, she tried to keep her voice level. “I think you were wrong to keep me in the dark about your ability to shift until now. Working with flowers, berries, roots and bark—I sensed you were into deeper stuff than that. And I frustrated myself all to hell and back trying to penetrate your psychic shell. “

“Have patience, Doctor. You’re starting to scare the bejesus out of me. So let’s get back to you and your jaguar. How long does it take to shift?”

“A matter of a few minutes. Every molecule in my body will unite and make new compounds. Along with a simultaneous realignment of muscles and bones, my body’s involved in a massive rearrangement of nerve endings and blood vessels. At first, it was a physically and mentally exhausting transformation...crossing over from one world into an interconnecting cosmos. But now very little pain is involved during the transformation.”

“Animal cunning joined with human intelligence. Wow! To perform a dramatic energy exchange like that is so unreal. Did you inherit the ability? Does anyone know you’re both animal and human? Has anyone seen you shift yourself into a jaguar?”

Giving her arm a squeeze, he kissed her lightly on the cheek and squatted down on the ground at her feet. “Just my Jaguar Clan. My father, mother and brother are shifters—they live in the States—a large farm in the southwest. We’ve always lived a secluded life. An Incan Shaman was one of my ancient ancestors. He started the feline lineage. Shortly after puberty, all the males in the Herrera clan are able to change their physical forms into jaguars. Most of the families have ranches or farms close to my dad’s.”

Dropping down onto the floor, she embraced him. “Are you ever afraid that

the dark side of your two identities might rule over your human side?”

His breath, hot against her cheek, fanned her face. “Meditation, herbs and chanting keep my bestial nature under control. But I did have a strange situation develop when I was around thirteen; I failed to stop a partial transformation from happening. My fangs and a hairy face confused the hell out of an old farm laborer. He lifted his hoe and I took off. I don’t experience a partial metamorphosis anymore, but I still have kinks to work out.

“Believe it or not you, too, can transcend the imagined boundaries of self. You have limitless potential once you recognize your inner power animal. You already share a trait with the big cats. On horseback, you covered a vast territory as you ran with the buffalo. A jaguar, too, needs lots of room to roam—he commands a prey density from twenty to sixty square miles.”

Reluctantly, Robina pulled away and stared at him and took in a quick breath of disbelief. “I have no Indian shaman among my ancestors, but I’ve always loved cats. Mangy alley cats, normally shy of humans, are drawn to me. Could there be more depth to my relationship with felines?”

“I sense your strength. Don’t underestimate yourself. Open your mind and you’ll see the world with new eyes. Coming out of a coma, you pushed aside the veil hiding your otherworldly energy. You’re no longer physically grounded. Now anything is possible when it comes to stretching your psychic abilities.”

“Yesterday, in the canoe, the only thing stretched was my patience. I was just a step away from losing it. Before we set sail, I’ve got another beef to air.” She stood and waited as he leisurely stretched his long legs and then, in a lightning-fast movement rose up and swept her into his arms. “You get so bloody domineering and high-handed. I was ready to whack you with the pole. And what’s with the ‘ready to soldier on’ after I nearly drowned? Sometimes I feel like telling you to go f...yourself.”

“Our special interlude of sharing passionate clutches and clinches yesterday morning, didn’t it soften some of my verbal punches to your sensitive gut? I realize I come across as unsympathetic and dictatorial at times. Being arrogant and overbearing when I’m at the helm comes by way of my genetic jaguar makeup. I’ve managed to get my own way up to now—immobilized as I am by my ego. But I want to break out of the dullness. I treat you the same way I treated Jerry. But he always told me to go to hell when I acted like an asshole.

“I’ll learn to squelch my insensitivity. Just give me a chance. Bear with me. I’ll get better.”

Well, strip my gears and call me shiftless, she thought as she cradled her face against the corded muscles of his chest, the doc admitted he needed help in the sensitivity department.

Chapter Four

Taut like bow strings on a violin, Robina felt the tendrils of apprehension in her neck as she walked over to the right side of the raft and began to help Elejandro with the paddling. A flood of adrenaline rushed to her head and her face burned as she tried to visualize him turning into a jaguar. Struggling with uncertainty, her disquieting thoughts refused to be stilled. According to him, she owned an animal spirit, too. Concentrating on those traces of animal practices found in the lives of Scotland's ancient Celtic heroes, she wondered if she'd be able to tap into her own powers and access a shift in her perception of reality.

Her ancestral lineage emerged as an important genetic factor during the last few days. She must owe her Scottish Druid ancestors some credit for her telepathic ability. The fire now raging in her head, brought about by the plane accident, had revved up her imagination about redheaded Neanderthals, too. To survive back then, they must've been a hardy group, successful at hunting and keeping the enemy from the door.

Did her love of backpacking alone in Southeast Asia, Australia and across Europe indicate she'd inherited her ancestors' risk-taking adventurous spirits?

Why not? Her wanderlust started when she ran away from home at three. Completely naked, she'd covered a couple of city blocks before taken into custody.

When the raft drifted closer to shore, Elejandro pointed with his paddle. "There's another river off to the right. It's got significantly higher levels of suspended elements, and that muddy gush indicates that heavy-duty jets are being used to wash and process the soil. That means we're nearing the village."

As Robina manned the paddle, the sun's rays made a glittering path along the mile-wide river that led to the village. The heavy presence of the jungle off to her side created a living picture. Impossibly complex. Boundary-less. Sprawling. Endless. Constantly undercut by the muddy hills, an ongoing wearing-away of jungle growth clogged the river with fallen trees and branches. At times, they worked hard to make any headway at all.

Until yesterday, she'd felt confident and full of an enormous kind of exhilaration whenever she was around Elejandro. But some of the warmth and the secure feeling of an attraction being shared experienced a shakeup. Shadows of doubt closed in around her. Her independent spirit had crackled with exasperation several times while they'd manned the canoe. Elejandro came close to being ruthless, and a southern saying came to mind: *The best way to a man's heart is a knife through the chest cavity*. No wonder! He's half jaguar! Not a man-eater according to most sources, but all cats will eat humans under certain conditions. Even sweet

little domesticated cats will eat their dead owners after they've been dead a day or two.

Disturbed by her dark thoughts, she tried to get real. Once they found Jerry and banished Gunther from the island, Elejandro would continue with his life's work: discovering plant medicines for the diseases plaguing the earth's humans and animals. And she'd return to her parent's buffalo ranch in Wyoming.

About two miles from Luizao, they pulled the raft onto the beach, and Elejandro drove the two paddles between the logs of the raft and into the red-colored soil. Looking up, the brilliance of the sky, all pink and yellow, held Robina spellbound while she prepared their dinner.

As they ate their yucca fries, rice and left-over fruit salad, their soft voices floated in the night air along with the sounds of the chirps and croaks of the crickets and frogs. Not long after she'd eaten, Robina fell onto the bed and slept.



Waking at dawn, Elejandro sat up and glanced over at the redheaded cowgirl with the lightly suntanned skin tones, fantastic body and intoxicating scent. Always on the lookout for meaningful signs, he thought of how she'd fallen from the sky and landed in his yard at a most opportune time. She hadn't yet acquired the ability to receive his images, and that proved fortunate. During the last couple of days, he'd mentally directed his imagination through every wildly

intriguing position in the Kama Sutra text.

At thirty-five, finding a woman whose magnetism captured his heart stunned him. It took just a few days for him to open his heart to Robina. Quickly advancing beyond the sexual and a yearning to be one with her, he even shared his secrets with her. But, if she viewed him as a deadly animal, there'd be no shattering of his solitary world. He'd be left without the anticipation of a future that promised the thrilling and unpredictable.

The buffalo cowgirl gave him more than a cursory glance when he joined her in bed last night. Her glittering green eyes lingered on his body for a moment before she drifted back to sleep. Against his wishes, his body had responded with heated waves of desire.

To think she might hang around the rainforest long enough for him to experience her fully present spirit sent a rush of heated blood spiraling through him. Would she ever come to understand the lure of this island, and the joy to be found in the primitive environs? Everything to feed the soul, body and mind flourished here in plentiful supply.

True knowing. Would she ever get into it? Would he get a chance to be with her when she communicated with the animals and plants using her senses, not her intellect? Like any other predator in the jungle would she allow the mysterious forces within her to surface? A wondrous ecstatic creature, she already

personified a cat's spirit when it came to strength, beauty and gracefulness. And once she formed an emotional attachment with her beast, a luminous energy field would open up a new dimension, and she'd look at the world in a new way. Pushing past the life-death barrier while in a coma constituted the first step, and recognizing her power animal loomed as the next step.

The jaguar always maintained a dramatic hold on him, especially when he tingled with an urge to feed his lust. Clawing at his insides, the cat hungered to be released and allowed to run free.

This morning the animal's hot blood left him with an enhanced sexual hunger like never before. His heated blood stirred up sensuous feline memories of having his throbbing shaft inside Robina, and her legs wrapped around him as he rode her over the edge. On recalling his tongue lapping up her arousal with such clarity, the urge to engage in more delirious sensation overwhelmed him.

Jaguar females didn't just rely on their scent to attract the local male, they used a seductive mating call—a series of loud hooting sounds. Once the cats were together, they aggressively mated—in between the female's attacks and invitations—over a hundred times a day. Each act lasted only nine seconds, but the sheer number of them rated the jaguars as top animal when it came to sexual prowess.

Last night, Robina had directed signs his way indicating she longed to

engage in sex with him, but she didn't follow through. She'd gone back to sleep. Not to worry. She'd forgiven his insensitivity and his chances for success looked good. Leaning over her body, he kissed her damp forehead. "You're due for more skin protection."

When she opened her eyes and gazed up at him, his male antenna received a message. She radiated with an aching, haunting sexuality. She wanted him. Was he available? Well, let's check. Apart from his passionate interlude with Robina a couple of days ago, the last time he'd enjoyed sex with a real live woman took place two years ago last Christmas. So yes, he was her man.

In warp speed, her pajamas were in a pile on the dirt floor. "Another magic elixir from the jungle foliage, eh?" She gave him a quick kiss on the mouth. Then, turning over onto her stomach, she personified the jaguar patiently waiting for the action to come to her.

He tried to keep his voice even, but the touch of lips lush as a flower opening up at dawn, caught him off guard. To still the gasp surging up through his throat, he clenched his teeth. "I can sure understand why hordes of mosquitoes tried to rip through the netting last night. You redheads are so damn tasty.

"This mixture of Camu Camu and Sangre de Drago detoxifies and keeps your skin young. All medicinal recipes are somewhat similar. After being crushed, the herbs are soaked in alcohol for three or four weeks. Oils and liquids are

extracted and the pulp cooked into ash. Following that, they're recombined."

After his plant-healer lecture, meant to keep the throbbing sensations gathering in his groin under control, he ran his hand between her thighs. "Now try to relax while I give your cramped muscles and knotted joints a grease job. I'll stroke your flesh until you feel like I'm massaging you from the inside out. It's all about opening yourself up to the tropical surroundings.

"Before you return to civilization," he continued, "I want to paint your body. Down here in the tropics, South American Indians dress their bodies in black and red paint. Some pierce their noses, the sides of their lips and cheeks and insert palm needles. It's meant to imitate the whiskers of a jaguar, their way of honoring the big cat."

"Ouch! So kisses on the mouth are done with great care."

"They don't kiss any the less for it. Other tasty bits and pieces get lucky."

Macaws swarmed to the salt lick close by, and they raised a hell of a row. Instead of finding the racket distracting, he allowed their rampant energy to pour over him as he worked on Robina's arms, legs and back.

An incredible feeling of freedom surged through him. Just a few days with this redheaded beauty and she'd taken over all his fantasies. Enticing, stunning and exuding a vital power, she epitomized all things feminine and attractive. Her hair, the color of red maple leaves and her green eyes—the very essence of her—

smashed through his ordered world. The jaguar inside him moved restlessly. *Damn it, I must get my beast under control.* When it came to opening herself up to her surroundings, she'd aced that course, too.

Hoodlums were on the loose in this eastern part of the island, but he managed to tamp down his growing concern for Jerry. Robina's amazing flexibility and her earthy sensual nature left him no room for negative thoughts. Not this morning. He felt inexhaustible. Insatiable. Releasing some of his emotional neediness obliterated sane reasoning.

As his hands gave a quick last touch to her chest and belly, he never felt more like part of the dynamic eruptions going on in the jungle. Besides the explosive sound of the macaws clatter, the air bristled with the drone and buzz of the insects and the barking and screeching of spider monkeys as they swung from branch to branch and dangled from vines not far from the hut.



Stunned when Elejandro suddenly sat up, flexed his muscles and beat his chest, Robina couldn't stop giggling. As if in answer to his "A-a-a-a", a monkey jumped out of a tree and peered at him through the mosquito netting.

Finally getting control of her giggling, she pushed him back down on the bed. "If you don't calm down, I'm going to tie you up with some vines. Then I'll torture you by tickling you with bird feathers." Abandoning herself to a burst of

sensation, she brushed Elejandro's lips with hers before her tongue slithered inside his mouth and did some uniting and entangling. Deeper, ever deeper, caught up in the sensuous thrill brought on by the gentle tongue strokes he gave in return, she allowed her pleasure to build.

Growling low in his throat, as if emphasizing his right to do with her what he will, his possessiveness sent a surge of heat—sharp and drastic—throughout her body. What a man! His complicated characteristics exuded both a powerful and peaceful nature. Under his scent of musk, she smelled a foreign odor hinting at the shadowy darkness within and reminding her that she knew so little about him. But whenever she tried to pick up on his thoughts, she ran up against a brick wall. He blocked her mental intrusions with ease.

With her hands at his shoulders, she began to suck one of his nipples. As she gave the second stiff dark nipple the same attention as the first, she wrapped herself up in the energetic eruptions outside the tent: the hissing, whistling, hooting, humming and shrieking. Her imagination took over as the sounds poured over her. The heated conditions of their human over-heated sweat-streaked bodies and the pungent odors they emitted might've stirred the nearby poisonous snakes to action.

Picking her up, Elejandro settled her thighs on his shoulders and snaked his tongue along her wet feminine cleft, speared it into her inner flesh and coaxed

tremors from her. She liked her vagina stimulated, and now he left no doubt of his enjoyment in doing what thrilled her by teasing and tasting her unrelentingly.

Bucking against him, her head whipping from side to side, all her sensitive sensations were now gathered in all those delicious nerve endings he laved with his tongue. Finding it impossible to hold back breathy gasps and shuddering sighs, the tension, tightening and wanting were soon too much for her. Increasing her pleasure twofold, he continued to stimulate her clitoris as she arched backwards. With her arms supporting her, she convulsed raggedly and violently.

Still quivering from her exquisite aftershocks, she shuffled slowly down Elejandro's body, her lips, tongue and teeth leaving streams of wetness behind as she nipped, licked and stroked in the shadowed hollows of his upper torso. After scraping her nipples across his flat abdomen, she slipped her face down between his thighs. Swiping and tasting, her tongue and lips made their way up and down his slick, hard shaft.

A short time later, when she jiggled his tightened male clusters, Elejandro gently rolled her onto her back and surged into her.

To the insistent sounds around her, beating in rhythm with her racing heart, his penis massaged her intimate flesh. Pushing in, sliding all the way out, he hovered and held back several times. Her pleasure multiplied to such a degree she, once again, found it too much to bear. Her body spun out of control, and a long

gasp escaped her throat. And, as his fiery fluids gushed into her depths, she writhed uncontrollably. Her panting breaths kept time with his driving need. Rising and falling. Rising and falling. Pulsing through her belly and thighs, a symphony of sensation pushed her into a shaking rapture of orgasmic delight.

All of Robina's thoughts narrowed to the man with the deep husky voice and the unique spirit. With his strange curious plants, he worked his deeds of medical rescue, both physical and mental. He'd even convinced her that her separateness from a jaguar was only an illusion. His ability to shift was proof of that, so how could she refute it?



While Robina luxuriated in the sticky, warm afterglow, Elejandro's thoughts dwelt on the adventurous spirit sharing his bed. Smart, receptive, insightful, open and magnificent, the northern redhead's flesh and blood had burned for him. Concentrating solely on him, she became one with his spirit and, tilted off its axis his world had dropped away.

Although he refused to categorize their magnificent connection as mindless sex, cold reality weakened their red-hot bonding. The buffalo cowgirl had a life back in Wyoming, so this adventure would be over for her as soon as they found Jerry and recouped the yacht. And, for the rest of his life, he'd be left with only memories. As a result, he intended to not only absorb the essence of her, but the

substance of her, too. “I’m ready to make my first scouting expedition into enemy territory. How about you? But if you need more rest, you don’t need to come with me today.”

“Just give me my hair coloring and my instant bronze suntan lotion and I’m ready for action.”

“Get your overnight bag ready then. Take everything you need for a night on the town. We’ll be bar-hopping and there’ll be lots of dancing.”

“Luckily, I brought along an outfit for just that kind of evening. I had planned on taking in a few of Perth’s hottest bars and clubs, but never got around to it.”



Robina, bathed in sweat, followed Elejandro along the overgrown muddy trail leading into Luizao. She wore her light drip-dry clothes, but still felt ridiculously overdressed in the ferociously hot and humid climate. Even in her bug-proof clothes, hordes of bugs buzzed a few inches from their target.

Elejandro’s pace never varied. His shiny wild mahogany skin looked so tantalizing and yet the bugs didn’t bother him. His clothes weren’t sprayed like hers and yet no chiggers showed a desire to take a chunk out of him.

The moisture in the atmosphere caused her to perspire profusely. Her pants and shirt were sopping wet and sweat scalded her eyes. The foliage in the canopy

above kept out much of the light, so the temperature on the forest floor hovered around seventy-two degrees. Because she stopped from time to time in order to swipe at her face with a piece of cotton, Elejandro got ahead of her. Struggling along in the dim light, she ducked under overhead branches and leapt over dead tree trunks. Keeping a steady pace proved impossible. Undetectable holes were her nemesis. She'd fallen into several of them. Constantly grabbing at tree limbs and vines, she found it a struggle to stay on her feet.

The air hummed with insects creating a constant buzzing in her ears. As she performed all kinds of contortions in order to make her way past walls of spider webs, she found it analogous to movie actors ducking through laser beams as they did their jewel-thief characterizations.

Razor sharp leaves and the stinging bark of the trees were enough of a hazard without poisonous insects continually dropping down on her. The microscopic insects were unbelievably annoying. One did its bloodsucking routine down the back of her neck and left her skin intensely irritated. Monkeys were nowhere to be seen, thank goodness. The doc told her that much of their energy would be zapped by early afternoon.

Elejandro turned, checked her out and waited till she caught up with him. Making her way through the jungle became so much easier when he broke trail. Being attacked by the many-bladed trunks of the palm trees and getting tripped

up by the overcrowded vegetation rarely happened now. Probably gaining powerful persuasive techniques from the primitive vibes radiating from the centuries-old twelve story trees, he completely avoided cutting and hacking. His machete turned into a magic wand. With a flick, it gave the plants a suggestion to clear the way and they happily submitted.



The noise of hundreds of generators announced that they'd reached the outskirts of Luizao. Elejandro stopped in his tracks and motioned Robina to join him. After digging into his backpack, he took out two small sacks. "Use these gold flakes when you barter with the Luizao shopkeepers." Stuffing his gold into the front pocket of his roomy pants, he masked his uneasiness with a deceptive coolness. Giving her a conspiratorial wink, he said, "How about visiting a restaurant first?"

"Sounds great. It's been a while since we've taken the time to sit down and eat a real meal."

Once they emerged from the jungle, and walked along the well-trodden trail leading into the center of the village, he turned to Robina. "After we eat, we can take a walk around the area. Then we can make that three mile trek to the open pit mining site that sits alongside the river bank. The Latinos' homes are another mile farther up the river."

“The river’s only three miles away?”

“Yeah. It makes a sharp turn and flows closer to Luizao at the north end. Three months ago when I was here, that farmer I told you about gave me a drawing that showed the layout of the village. The one mile road that leads to the airport starts at the other end of the town.”

Elejandro’s mind exploded with warning signs as they headed toward the Centro Café, the first ramshackle establishment on the outskirts of the town. “While we eat, talk very little. We’re there to listen and observe. What we need are a few clues about where and what Gunther is up to.”

Seated at one of the ten large wooden tables, he struggled to keep his mouth shut. A monkey chained to a pole looked incredibly unhappy, and an inner pain gnawed at Elejandro’s insides. But he had to keep his scalding fury under wraps. When a young waitress dressed in a long red skirt and colorful blouse came to the table, he glanced at her name tag and tried to keep his voice flat. “Has that monkey been injured, Veronica?”

“No. We keep him in the restaurant because the kids love to see a monkey up close. Now what can I get for you?”

“We want arepas with lots of cheese. And two chichas.”

When the waitress left, Robina, who sat across from him, nodded at the menu on the far wall. “I love the corn-based beer, but how do you know I’ll like

arepas?”

“Because they’re absolutely delicious. They’re flat cornmeal patties split in two and filled with cheese. I’m addicted to them.” A great snack for sure. But how was he supposed to enjoy them with a monkey staring at him with sad eyes?

As they walked through the marketplace a little later, Elejandro absorbed the buzz and bustle. Basala logs, enormous pots of soup simmering over open fires, live fish in wicker baskets, condiments and potions blended into one powerful aroma and gave assurances that all was well with the world. False advertising, to be sure.

Robina shook her head in despair. “Just look at the stall over there. That woman’s cutting a slab of raw meat...blood and fat flying every which way. And those turtle legs on the same table...they’re covered in blood.” Then she pointed to a boy who looked about five years old. He held an iguana out for their inspection. “I guess selling pets is a family affair. One way to make a few gold flakes.”

Elejandro scowled at the child. “It’s not right. The poor animals suffer.

People should leave the wild animals alone.” He smiled at the street children selling banana chips from the huge bowls they held. Tables of papayas, bananas, yams and giant avocados were next to the chemist who sold everything from herbal ointments to medicinal remedies for diabetes, arthritis and dry mouth. Glancing at the people who milled around the vegetable sellers and the stalls filled

with mining provisions and clothing, he marveled at the vibrancy of the villagers. Considering their lives were ruled by a bloody tyrant, they managed to make everything appear to be business as usual.

Robina pulled her old straw hat farther down her forehead. “That shirtless guy standing behind the stall to our right gave me a thorough examination. Maybe he thinks I’ve just been washed up on the beach.”

“I doubt it. He’s probably wondering if we’re married. Let’s check him out.”

Reaching over and patting the pocket where Elejandro held his bag of gold flakes, Robina spoke in a whisper. “I’ll let you do the talking.”

On getting a closer look at the middle-aged man behind a stall, Elejandro summed him up as dangerous. Testosterone-loaded, he took in the two of them with a surly look meant to intimidate. His broken nose and the cold illusiveness swimming in the depths of his icy brown eyes gave evidence of a pugnacious nature.

In response to Elejandro’s request for a gun, the guy nodded. With a slight suggestion of a sneer, he darted under the table to one of the boxes stacked beneath. Bringing out a gun, he waved it in the general direction of the small sack Elejandro held. “I see you have some gold flakes. If you give me an ounce and a half of your dust, the gun is yours.”

“Hey,” Elejandro said, “In the city, I can get seven or eight hundred dollars

for an ounce.”

“When in the hell do you ever get into a big city? Do you work for Gunther?”

Elejandro shook his head. “I live in Quito. I fly in eggs, beef, butter and liquor. Stuff for Gunther and his men.”

The vendor set the gun on the table. “Take it or leave it. You won’t get a better deal in Luizao. Used chain saws are going for the same price.”

Elejandro shook his head and handed him the bag. While the shopkeeper removed some gold flakes and weighed them on a scale that was most likely faulty, he picked up the gun and took aim at a squawking macaw in a cage at the back of the shop. “I’ll need some ammunition.”

Elejandro bristled as he watched the guy remove more gold flakes for the shells. The miners were being shafted. It would be almost impossible to hang onto their gold flakes when prices were set so high. The seller, his glance, narrow and glassy, gave him the box of shells. “Are you planning to go jaguar hunting?”

“No. But I’d like to bag an anteater or a tapir before I take off for Quito,” he lied. .

“We’ve gotta get going,” he said, grabbing Robina’s arm. “I don’t think we should stick around this place any longer. Sad, eh? The villagers used to enjoy a society where no gold or money changed hands. Gift-giving and trading labor and farm goods used to be the way they survived. But, as you’ve just observed,

Gunther's changed their bartering society to one based on gold. It's upset their belief system. Everything's in a tangle. Their harmony is undermined. They've become a free-spending crowd, and the greedy shopkeepers swallow up their gold flakes. Gunther's made them slaves."

"Thank God I don't have to do any shopping today."



By the time Robina had trudged along the single dirt track that traversed the jungle from the village to the mining site, even the fifty-foot strands of wild orchids had lost their magic. Then, over a slight hill, she caught sight of the river.

A short walk later, she stood at the top of a hillside. Looking down at the giant open gold mining crater in the jungle floor below, she let out a groan. Her throat tightened, and she swallowed hard before she trusted her voice. Hundreds of thousand year-old trees, dismembered and slashed giants, littered the area. Her heart broke into a million pieces; she'd never seen such devastation. Huge holes filled with toxic waste gave the pit a look of a bombed-out scene after an apocalyptic war. "My God, what a grim sight. There must be over two hundred men down there in the sweltering heat and mud."

Staring down at the scene as if it were a living poisonous monster, Elejandro threw out his arms in a hopeless gesture. "Nothing but black plastic lean-tos, hand-dug pits and torn-up trees—it's a hellhole, all right. It only took a year to

turn a clean river and a large chunk of the jungle into this nightmare. Wildlife called this area home before Gunther's arrival.

"The last time I was here, that farmer, Paola Pentido, told me that those deep mining pits fill up with water. The mosquitoes love it, and they reward the miners with malaria. New strains of mosquitoes develop, so the villagers aren't always immune to their toxic stings. Even when I visited the village three years ago, malaria was a problem. So I'd brought along fifty pounds of quinine bark powder for the local herbal healer."

"Sounds to me like they need you here."

"Once Gunther is history, the best I can do is make frequent trips to Luizao. The men working down in that God-forsaken crater will be left with all kinds of health problems."

Just below her, Robina watched as a young man, naked to the waist, his dark brown skin soaked in sweat, hacked away at the brown, red and gray earth in, what looked like, a nine foot hole. Once he filled a bucket full of mud, he handed it to an older bewhiskered man who stood in a niche about halfway to the top. Then that guy handed it to a shirtless beefy guy who stood at the surface. The dirt was then scooped into a rough-hewn trough with metal sides. "What happens next?"

Elejandro's nostrils flared and his lips became a thin line. "A pint bottle of

mercury's poured over it. With a hose and wooden trowel, the muck and the gold bond. Then it's worked down through a sluice box of even finer sieves that strains the mud from the nuggets of gold and mercury. After it reaches a liner of heavy grabby carpet, the gold's taken out, put in a pan and heated with a blowtorch. The process is primitive, poisonous and brain damaging. By the time most of the mercury's burned off, the miner breathes in a good deal of the poisonous white vapor.

“It's inhuman. All day long, the miners dig in the muck or carry heavy sacks of mud on their backs. Panning for gold is addictive at first, but I think the villagers now realize it will kill them. Gunther's the only one who profits from this madness.”

Robina shook her head in disbelief. “Sounds like the guy's a law unto himself.”

“Right. Frontier Law allows him to do whatever he wants. No one dares to challenge his authority or complain about the brutal way he deals with the men. His gang members would kill them if they did. But things are changing.”

Robina's gaze wandered to the river where she spotted various barges with large hoses running every which way and men jumping in the water. “There, in the river...what's going on?”

“The miners also dive for gold. While one hose pumps the gravel up from the

river bottom, the other hose is used to pump air down to the divers. There must be nearly twenty of those scrap metal rafts out there. It's a dangerous job. Divers die when they surface too fast. Air hoses get tangled...they can only work for two hours at a time."

Robina pointed to a guy reclining on a hammock a few feet away from them. According to the sign leaning against the tree, he weighed the workers' gold flakes for a small charge. His name, Leon Luiz, was posted on one of the trees holding up the hammock. Close by, on a plank resting on two tree trunks, sat an old-fashioned pan balance. "Maybe we can get some information from him."

"Good idea. I remember talking to him on my first visit."



When they approached him, Leon hesitated and measured Elejandro for a moment. "I met you a few years ago. You're into herbs, aren't you? Your lodge is on the other side of the island, right?"

"That's me. You're very observant. I can't believe the changes around here. Everyone's digging for gold. Where are the farmers and the hunters?"

"Right now, that open crater generates close to two hundred ounces a day if you believe the talk going on. But I'm only weighing around thirty ounces a day, so it's a great exaggeration. That means the gold diggers will soon be moving on and ripping up more of the jungle.

“And the cost of goods and services is far too high. The guys who’ve set up the shops, some are local people, are getting greedier and greedier. They’re asking for an arm and a leg for their stuff. Cigarettes cost one and a half grams of gold dust and they want eight grams for a bottle of liquor. And Gunther Wolsey and his mob demand ten percent of all the gold each man takes out of that hellish crater.” He gave Robina a wry grin. “Eating out is only for the rich.”

She let out a groan. “I guess the men are lucky to have any gold left at the end of the month.”

Leon nodded. “That’s the way it is with most of the families. Just ask the poor buggers blasting away at the earth with their fire hoses...filling their holes until they’re up to their knees in mud.

“A few miners tried to put one over on old Gunther. They’d somehow managed to save up enough gold to pay the cowboys for a flight out of this wretched place.”

“Cowboys?”

“They’re the bronco-busters who fly their aging planes up and down short, bumpy, jungle airstrips.

“But the hoodlums found out about it. And recently, when six miners tried to hitch rides with the cowboys, they were dragged off into the jungle, and they’ve never been seen again.” As he slicked back his hair, shiny and thin as black silk, he

gave them a tired smile.

“Gunther’s got a few dozen men digging for ancient gold artifacts, too.” Speaking in a voice heavy with annoyance and disappointment, he continued, “The Incas filled a couple of ships full of gold treasures nearly five hundred years ago. Can you believe it? They brought their precious stuff over here and hid them in a cave. Later on, the Spaniards came looking for the gold. They didn’t find any, but none of the sailors left. In time, the female Incas and the Spanish sailors married. All the Latinos who live here are descendents.

“But there’s hope. People are slowly waking up. They’ve made Ramiro their leader and they’re starting to strike back. They’re raiding Gunther’s warehouses, and it’s really starting to piss him off. If I’m getting the right vibes around here, all hell’s going to break out, and soon.

“One of the villagers who does construction work at the airport heard that Gunther’s got a planeload of guns flying in here later today. But if those thugs think that stone-age weapons are useless against guns, they’re in for a big surprise.”

Elejandro ran his hand over one of the pans on Leon’s scale, inwardly cursing the thriving world market for precious metals. “Bows and arrows, spears and poisoned darts can be very effective, that’s for sure. Anyway, it’s been great talking to you, Leon. And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make our presence known.

We're trying to keep a low profile.”

“No problem. I sense you're here to confront Gunther. Sure hope you can help us get rid of him. That guy has no soul. Before you go, I'll write down a description of that bastard.” Taking a pad and pen from his shirt pocket, he wrote it down and handed it to Elejandro.

“He kidnapped Jerry, my friend. So that's foremost on my mind right now.” The more loathsome Elejandro found the man behind the slavery, the more he realized the danger involved when it came to finding the kid.

“I remember that young man. Monkeys fascinated him. Right? Sorry, I haven't seen him around here.”

“Yeah. I don't imagine Gunther lets him wander around the marketplace. Anyway...thanks for all your information. See you later.”



Once they'd descended into the human anthill, Robina looked up at the jungle that stared down at her like a prison. If Gunther were dumped into that suffocating dense greenery, he might never find his way out. Even if he did, the ferocious heat and the building humidity would sap his strength and give the bugger a good scare. He'd leave the island, post-haste.

Elejandro tapped Robina on the back after they'd trudged between dozens of tiny digging sites jealously separated by branches, mud-covered logs, tarps and

string.

“You told me that you’d taken Spanish at the university. How about giving me a sample of your fluency?”

“I’ll answer your question in Spanish. You tell me if it’s good enough to get by.”

“Okay. I’m listening.

Taking a moment to go over what she intended to say, a flicker of apprehension coursed through her nervous system. The last time she’d spoken in Spanish was back home in Wyoming two months ago. She shook off her nervousness and told him, in Spanish, how she’d learned to speak fluently; a gift from the Mexican cowboys that worked her family’s ranch.

“Pretty good. The gang here won’t have any trouble understanding you. But don’t speak unless you absolutely have to. You lack speed.”

When they climbed down into a staked off area defined by the log walls holding back the dirt, Elejandro turned to her. “Let’s check out this group.”

As she scraped some clay from her Wellingtons, a sweaty, grimy young man nudged her shoulder.

“Leni Velho,” he said, reaching for her hand, “you guys are new around here.”

Elejandro stepped in front of her. “You probably haven’t seen us because my sister and I’ve been working in an area at the edge of the jungle. Not much luck

yet, but we're hoping to run into a richer vein as we dig farther into the jungle."

Leni grinned. "Good luck with that." He gave Robina a raking gaze as his eyes boldly appraised her body. "By the way, any chance of getting a dance tonight?"

She gave a negative shake to her head. "Sorry. Too much work to do."

Elejandro grabbed her hand and led her out of the mining pit. "Let's take a walk along the beach farther north. The first time I came here, I got a chance to check out the homes the villagers built about a mile north of here. I sure hope Gunther's left those houses alone. There were about two hundred of them...dozens built higher up on the hills. The interiors were much like my lodge...but smaller. Kitchen, bedroom and the outside dining hut," he said, his tone filled with respect.

The homes came into view and Robina stared in awe. A series of raised boardwalks—some hair-raisingly unsafe—separated one home from the other. "Are all the houses built on stilts?"

"Most of them, except those higher up on the hill."

It didn't take long to reach the first house. Made of hand-hewn materials and split boards, its balcony and walkway were decorated with colorful wildflowers. From the balcony, a woman waved at them and Robina waved back. "That woman must hate Gunther. To see her husband working in the blazing sun, panning for the gold he has no use for."

Dozens of naked kids, in a whirl of splashing and screaming, experienced a rollicking good time jumping and diving in the river. Some ran along the bank of the river waving and calling out to them. Robina waved back.

“Three years ago, I saw their parents plying the river for fish in their small canoes. They greeted their friends and acted like people in a shopping mall back home, as they talked about the fish they’d caught and the animals they’d killed with their poisoned blowguns. Anteaters, wild pigs, rodents and monkeys were on the menu then. But there’s not much hunting going on now.”

“They’ve still got a shopping mall out front. The river must supply them with a variety of succulent dishes.”

“That’s true. If they get tired of dried fish, all they have to do is walk into the river and collect fish from their communal nets.”

Chapter Five

Robina insisted that they scope out the town separately, and Elejandro had reluctantly agreed. First, she headed for the Centro Café. The waitress, Veronica, who worked there, owned a camcorder and she'd told her that she was willing to sell it.

Her own camcorder had been burned up in the plane crash, and she missed it like the very devil. She'd been a birdwatcher since she was a kid. She'd used the garden shed as a bird hide, and cut small openings into every side of it in order to observe the birds from every angle.

Veronica had set the asking price a little high, but there were no camera shops in Luizao so tonight the beautiful waitress had a sale.

There were just a few customers in the café when she arrived. Three men sat at one of the long wooden tables, and a group of teenagers chattered loudly at another table. As soon as she sat down at the bar, Veronica came over to her after she waited on a customer three stools down. In a bright strapless sundress and her heavy mass of gleaming black hair flowing down to her shoulders, she radiated the kind of stunning beauty that left men in danger of losing their wits.

Veronica was all smiles. “You’ve decided to buy my camcorder, right?”

“Right.”

“Are you a photographer? You seem so eager to get your hands on a camera.”

“I forgot my camcorder and I feel lost without it. I’m a birdwatcher and here I am in the company of the most exotic birds in the world.”

Bringing out the camcorder from under the counter, Veronica set it on the counter in front of her. After she counted the money that Robina gave her, she tucked it into her pocket. “How great is that? Real money instead of gold flakes. Now, can I get you something?”

“No, I have to get going.”

“You’re here for a short time aren’t you? You’re going to take some pictures and then vanish?”

“You think I came in on one of the planes, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah. Nobody comes to this island except the guys who bring in the supplies. And they don’t stay long. So I thought you came with that guy you were with yesterday. I thought he might be a pilot. He didn’t like to see the animals in cages—but there’s nothing I can do about it.

“But I can warn you about a female jaguar that escaped yesterday. My neighbor kept it as a pet, can you believe it? It was a baby when he found it, and he brought it up. Anyway, it escaped from the caged area where it was kept, but it

probably won't stray too far. So keep your eye out for it when you're hiking down those jungle trails."

"Thanks for the information. Now, you were going to ask me something, weren't you?"

Her expression tightened. "Luizao's turned into a slave camp, and I don't like living here anymore." She looked around the room, leaned forward and lowered her voice. "When you leave this mud hole, can I come with you? I can pay you with this real money."

"I'm staying. Sorry. My partner and I just flew in here, all right. But we won't be flying out for a quite a while. We just bought into a claim up on the hillside."

"Well, good luck, then." Her face clouded with uneasiness and disappointment before she turned away.

"Wait." Robina touched the young woman's arm. "A few weeks ago, a friend of mine, Jerry Walsh, flew down here, but I can't find him anywhere. Maybe you've run into him." Last night, Elejandro had given her a description of Jerry. In an effort not to sound like a detective, she was determined to make sure her tone held not only concern, but warmth. "Thin, tall, long thick brown hair kept in a short ponytail. There's a diamond stud in one of his ears. And, if there's a monkey around, it'll be on his shoulder."

Veronica's dark eyes held stark vivid fear in their depths as she looked at the two men who just entered the café. "No. I never saw any gringo that looked like that. Now I have to get back to work."

Not so much from her words, but certainly from her body language, she implicated Gunther and his hoodlums. She'd seen Jerry, no doubt about that.

Quickly leaving the café, Robina made her way into the jungle foliage out back. After changing into her dancing clothes, she quickly hid her backpack under some fronds and headed for the bar Elejandro had pointed out to her yesterday.



Elejandro hiked into Luizao's "Street of Dreams" where the laborers relaxed for the evening. While checking out the rat's warren of ditch-like streets flanked by dozens of rickety wooden firetraps, his thoughts focused on Robina. Aware of the inherent risk of being recognized as an outsider by one of Gunther's men, she'd managed to shove back her fears.

The long muscles of her legs, powerful and sinuous, as she strode along in front of him earlier, had intrigued him. He'd swear her hips and thighs drew strength from the earth beneath her feet. Confidence seemed to pour from her. He would no longer need to keep a close eye on her.

Moments later, at the entrance of the Scuttling Scorpion Bar, he stared at a futuristic satellite dish. Strapped to a giant tree—a hundred feet tall at least— he

was struck by the incongruity.

Inside, the dimly lit makeshift pavilion, haphazardly contrived of rough-hewn tree trunks and stripped tree limbs, it reeked of cigarette smoke and sweaty bodies. Its crude wooden skeleton was draped with a multi-colored rudimentary canopy of canvas and plastic tarps, loosely stitched or stapled together and sealed with tar.

Glancing around, Elejandro found the place utterly bereft of such amenities as real glasses and chairs. The bar consisted of a few slabs of wood balanced on some battered old oil drums and the seating consisted of one long bench. The only stools belonged to a trio of bleary-eyed musicians. They made hard swinging music with an accordion, drum and a jangling triangle; they sang simple poetic lyrics in Spanish.

The wives and girlfriends, dressed in short strapless dresses, gave the bar much needed splashes of color. On the small wooden dance floor, fourteen couples gave themselves over to the herky-jerky sound. The men placed a hand on the small of their partners' back, pulled the women's pelvises as close to theirs as was humanly possible, rested their cheeks against their partners' and whirled them around the periphery of the dance floor with wild abandon.

With their glittering flakes from their personal hauls of gold ore, the miners bought their booze and drank it from plastic cups. Unlike rum made from

molasses, the local stuff was made of fermented and distilled sugar cane. Earlier on, Elejandro observed the locally made high-octane liquor being made. A stoic old mule worked the wheel that ground the sugar cane. After the derived syrup fermented in a retired dugout canoe, it was boiled in a big pot.

The liquor in the newly distilled rum served to rid it of impurities, but Elejandro, wary of alcohol poisoning, decided to forgo the delights of the lethal local liquor. And he used up an outrageous amount of gold flakes for a bottle of imported Cuban beer.

The bartender, a giant Latino, with tattoos of blue anacondas winding around his biceps, acknowledged him with a murderous scowl, so he resisted asking him why his anacondas were blue. Taking a seat on a bench on one side of a long plank-topped table, he tuned in on the three uncouth, hard-bitten men opposite. Almost certain Gunther employed them, he breathed easier when they turned away after giving him some hard searching looks. Determined to keep a low profile, he nursed his sour beer and eavesdropped on the three thugs while surveying the drinking-hole spectacle. The miners were either shooting pool, playing cards, or howling like banshees at a soccer game between Argentina and Brazil that transpired live on an oversized television.

The three hired guns continued to boast about how many ounces of gold flakes they'd collected from the miners. But, when a sudden deluge of slurred

obscenities from an adjacent table of drunken poker players signaled the imminent eruption of bloody mayhem, they remained silent. Their eyes riveted on the gamblers.

Playing cards and coins flew as a beefy miner with a blotchy red face broke into a rage. He practically kicked the rugged table to pieces with his steel-toed boots as he tried to get his hands on the accused cheat, a nattily dressed little man smoking a cigarillo. Ignoring the cheat's hysterical protests of innocence, his attacker hurled him headfirst against one section of the bar. As it collapsed, the barrels supporting it rolled free and upended a few of the dancers. The females managed to land on their feet and quickly extricated themselves from the frightening situation. The males immediately joined in the fight. The other customers roared their encouragement and the musicians played a spirited version of a forro tune.

Much to the disgust of the soccer enthusiasts, a bottle, thrown by one of the poker players, shattered the TV screen during a sudden-death shoot-out. Furious and frustrated as hell, they attacked the poker players.

Elejandro glanced at the bartender—his previously bleak and miserable countenance now transfigured by a beaming, pearl and gold-studded grin—strode purposely into the midst of the melee. Bodies began to fly in all directions, and the observers quickly formed a respectful clearing around what must be a common

occurrence at the Scuttling Scorpion. The bartender crushed the blotchy-faced miner in one brawny arm, while choking the life out of a soccer fanatic. His feet were busy, too, as he methodically stomped on the unfortunate card cheat, his cigar still clamped securely between his teeth.

The awed miners abandoned their individual battles, inched forward and began to chant. “Del-gad-o, Del-gad-o. Del-gad-o.” The bartender responded to their shouts of encouragement by releasing the gasping sports fan, clenching his hammy fists together and applying them like a pile driver into the miner’s skull.

When the slurred foul-mouthed comments lost their ferocity, and the rising bloodlust ended abruptly, Elejandro’s eyes followed Delgado’s. At the entrance, Robina, dressed to stun, torment and kill, focused her radiant green eyes on Delgado. Her black lace cropped bolero blouse and red leather mini-skirt were backlit by the golden rays of the setting sun. An aura of bright primitive energy surrounded her, and hinted at otherworldly powers. Her eyes continued to hold Delgado’s.

The bartender lumbered across to Robina, and the musicians responded with gap-toothed grins when he nodded to them. Seconds later, a fiery samba rhythm rooted in jazz and African culture—a hundred beats to the minute—filled the room with a joyful rhythm. Reaching for Robina’s hand, Delgado began to move his hips sensually as if no one else in the world existed except the stunning

redhead and him.

Elejandro took a long swig of his beer to clear his head. Like the other men, Robina's physical charms had held him spellbound, too. But, in order to completely discharge the intense current of primitive fury, that had threatened to turn the Scorpion into a smoldering heap, more than a powerful sexuality had come into play. So he assumed that Robina's continuing improvement in sending out her thoughts, now made it possible for her to influence the behavior of others.

The miners, who weren't negotiating dances, set about repairing the damage to the tables and bar. Two of them ran behind the bar and conducted business as usual. The little card shark took this opportunity to scuttle out of the bar. Elejandro was almost sure he was headed for the airport.

Elejandro continued to eavesdrop on the thugs and, when one of them, a pig-eared loudmouth named Emilio, responded to a call on his satellite phone.

Split seconds later, Emilio confronted a man at the pool table after he took a shot. "Okay, Rodrigo, everyone knows you've panned sixty ounces of gold during the past two weeks. Where's Gunther's ten percent?" Emilio tore the cue from Rodrigo's hands and dragged the thin, skull-faced miner out of the bar.

The occupants of the Scorpion witnessed the brutal scene in utter silence. No one wanted to mess with Gunther's vicious gang of unscrupulous killers. Elejandro saw Robina look up at Delgado and gesture toward the entrance, but the

bartender made no move to get involved. He shrugged shame-facedly and returned to his post behind the bar. And who could blame him? If he interfered with Gunther's men, he'd become the focus of intense speculation. Fading into the shadows was the only sane course for him to follow.

After he saw Robina slip out a back door, Elejandro chose to follow the intoxicated men who poured out of the bar and gathered like famished sharks on the brink of a feeding frenzy. At the bar entrance, fueled by their cane juice overdose, Emilio and Rodrigo delivered punches. But the booze soon worked against Rodrigo. Completely wasted, his punches lacked force. Backing away, he staggered around to the side of the building and retched over and over again.



Standing in front of a café a block away from the Scuttling Scorpion, Robina realized that getting solid facts about Gunther's whereabouts wasn't going to be easy. The villagers shied away from giving his men a reason to focus on them. But she did learn a few things. Realizing that hanging on to some of their hard won gold flakes proved impossible, she picked up an undercurrent of unrest among the miners. Gunther's commercial establishments lured them into spending their gold on drinking and gambling, so they lacked the energy needed for hunting or farming. That meant they paid for their food, too—at highly inflated prices.

Hurrying back to where she'd hidden her backpack behind the Centro Café,

she changed into her shirt and long pants. Her backpack in tow, she headed back to the Scuttling Scorpion.

After waiting out front for twenty minutes, she realized that Elejandro didn't intend to join her.

Dammit all to hell and back, they'd agreed to work alone when they mingled with the pub crowd. But as for joining her on the trip to the airport, if it really had been a plan, was obviously scrapped. Her performance in the pub the night before had probably left him with the idea that she could take care of herself.

Well, she might as well get going, *Slap my ass and call me Sally, here I am again, way over my head. Just do it. Just do it.*

At the edge of town, the sign with an airplane carved into it indicated that the airport was a mile away. So, taking in a deep breath, she scurried over to the side of the road. If she saw anyone along the way, she intended to dive into the jungle and wait 'til they were out of sight. Starting to feel a little frightened when the lights from the cafes and bars got smaller and smaller, she knew one thing for sure. Gunther's thugs were far more of a threat than the animals in the jungle.

Her hiking boots were soon caked with mud as she hiked along the muddy road. The sun had sunk behind the trees and when random undetectable potholes threatened to fill her boots with filthy water, she took out her flashlight.

The truck traffic along this route was minimal. By studying the tracks

imprinted in the mud, she knew at least two trucks had rumbled into Luizao that day and then returned to the airport. Then, aiming her flashlight into the dark trees, she noticed where a plane had crashed high up in some branches. According to Elejandro, if you were searching for an airstrip in the jungle, you were on the right track if you came across plane wreckage.

Rather than worrying about Gunther's men and what they'd put her through if they figured out why she was in Luizao, she concentrated on her mission: finding out what kind of nefarious activities went on at the Luizao Airport.

When she caught sight of an orangey glow in the distance, she realized she'd reached her destination. The runway, now lit with flares and pots filled with some kind of fuel, indicated a plane would be landing shortly. Hiding a little way off the trail, she waited.

As usual, whining mosquitoes quickly found her, and to her dismay, the insecticide she sprayed onto her pants and long-sleeved shirt failed as a deterrent. The stagnant water in and around the mine site offered a great breeding place for the mossies, so the best thing to do was follow the example of the locals. Wait for them to land and then swat them.

Hearing the hum of a helicopter, she dug in her bag for her binoculars. Moments later, a large black chopper leveled off and barely cleared the trees at the

edge of the short landing strip. When it came to a stop in front of the large barn-like building that was thrown together with irregular planks, logs and tarps, the two pilots hopped out.

A man with a decrepit straw hat pulled down over his eyes drove out of the makeshift hangar in a forklift. He brought it to a stop beside the chopper and helped the pilots unload long rectangular boxes that appeared to be heavy—most likely bootleg rifles.

So Leon was right. Gunther's men would now be armed to the teeth. If Elejandro expected a more in-depth report, he was out of luck. Tired, filthy and feeling let down by Elejandro's cavalier attitude toward her safety, she started on the trip back home, a flimsy raft in the middle of the jungle.



Around one in the morning, when Elejandro joined Robina at their campsite, he concentrated on his jaguar genetics. Twenty-two years ago, at thirteen, he'd learned, soaked up and incorporated the ability to transform himself into a human feline composite. Tonight he planned to shape shift in order to find out where Gunther held Jerry prisoner.

Finding Robina safe and sleeping soundly, he walked into the jungle and called forth his jaguar. *Damn, I have an urge to retch.* Purging didn't happen very often, so something in his thinking teetered out of balance. Robina had shaken him right

down to his animal core. Her innate power to control those men in the pub, a power most likely inherited from her Scottish ancestors, had emerged and promised more surprising dives into her telepathic energies.

The change started to take effect, so he pulled himself up smartly. If he didn't want to become a mere approximation of his black jaguar, he had better focus. Controlling and maintaining thought and intention, while a series of rapid vibrations took over his body, was crucial. His muscles spasmed, and his skeletal structure experienced agonizing distortions. Beneath his skin, his organs expanded as his bones and skin made room for them. Around his heart and lungs, he felt a tremendous buildup of heat, and his skin itched almost beyond endurance.

Jaguar's furry mask, muzzle and large whiskers closed in around his face. His dark lips spread wide, and he snarled. Inside his powerful body, the jaguar grew stronger and stronger. The ends of his fingers tingled and became claws jack-knifing and flexing beneath his velvet paws. When his body convulsed again, he felt his face bulge out, and a series of deep, hoarse coughs made the noise in his ears increase to a deafening roar. Brain messages now pertained to combining his human logical reasoning with his power animal's instincts.

Sliding ever nearer to his jaguar's consciousness, he soon became one with him. No distinction. No separation. But Elejandro agonized over his inability to

control the animal's primal raw energy. There were times when he lacked the power to keep the beast's darker aspects of the wild under control.

Elejandro's grandmother, a shifter, said he must be conflicted. His dark side, a long time resident in his shadowy psyche, needed to be squashed. "You must own your own devils and eat your own fears. Bring the jaguar down from the tree." And she'd suggested that he accomplish this by finding a soul mate. Once he experienced the pure ecstasy of orgasm with a powerful woman on a regular basis, controlling his jaguar would be no problem. Whenever he shape shifted, he'd experience no difficulty overriding the cat's urge to kill.

Monkeys howled, birds whistled and owls hooted as the sleek black animal moved stealthily through the jungle like black liquid. Fireflies fluttered around in a flash of radiance lighting up the night. In this surreal environment, the jaguar symbolized the protector of all things feminine. Beauty, power, compassion—glorious and untamed—burst into full prominence. He represented the life and power of the night. Solitude and elusiveness.

The beast's built-in sensors picked up the hot, frantic rhythm of the forro coming from one of the all-night bars off in the distance. The sounds of the zabumba, or drum, accordion and a metal triangle were upbeat and catchy. But the smell of an open sewer mingled in with diesel fuel, quickly destroyed the powerful vibrations of the animal's playful side. Besides, the cat hunted for Gunther, so

observing how music calmed the enslaved miners was out. Targeting the men who gathered around the squalid collections of water pumps, huts, lean-tos, tents, hammocks and stumps that sat amid a sea of open-fires and mud, held no interest for him, either.

The black jaguar's spirit suffered from the dark night of the soul. Until Gunther and his gang were routed, his magic and power would be used for the purpose of creating heart stopping fear. Embracing the darkness, the beast welcomed the warbling of tree frogs, chirping of bats, and the shrill choruses of the insects. Emerging through his consciousness, "the cat on steroids" attitude came on strong. On thick, tough legs he silently, stealthily and instinctively maneuvered his long, supple body through the jungle's dazzling stifling onslaught. The heavy, humid air and pulsating jungle energy pounced on him and swallowed him up.

Keeping to the shadows, the animal crept down a hilly incline with grace and stealth as his thoughts worked in unison with other powerful senses. When the sky suddenly lit up with a sizzling bolt of lightning, quickly followed by bone-rattling thunder, his four hundred voluntary muscles were quickly galvanized into freeze mode. An ambush hunter, he peered into the unknown with an unblinking stare. Quickly deciding the loud blasts rolling across the sky and the flashes of light piercing the ground weren't aimed at him, he continued on his way.

Gunther's headquarters, built of wood, palm fronds, wild cane and clay

blended in well with the surroundings. And fortunately, judging from the man sleeping in front of the entrance, security wasn't all that tight.

Taking a time-out, he changed back into human form. The huge back door, made up of four roughly hewn logs, was locked. When he discovered one of the windows opened up with little effort, he slipped inside. A massive slab of wood and its tree trunk underpinnings made up the rectangular table and dominated the room. The eighteen rattan chairs were an indication the killers got together for briefings.

Elejandro rushed over to where several laptops, a few laser printers and three video monitors sat on makeshift shelving at the end the room. Information about Jerry's whereabouts was probably in the computers, but he'd need a password. In the next room, he dove into a huge bank of drawers. Dynamite and gas masks in the first one, maps in another.

Before he slipped into another brightly lit up room farther down the hall, he peered in through the partly opened door and checked for any occupants. Seeing no one, he pushed the door open and walked into the room. The six overhead bare light bulbs lit up a dozen hammocks that were attached to the posts that supported the roof. On the slab of wood that served as a table, he saw duct tape and a long piece of rope. Hearing a muffled banging sound off to his right, he opened the door to a small closet.

In a chair with his hands and feet duct taped together and the rag in his mouth secured in place with more tape, sat a deeply tanned man; his forehead revealed lines of fatigue and distress. A jagged scar ran above and below one of his dark eyes, and he blinked several times in an effort to adjust to the light. Even with his hair pulled back from his face, Elejandro found it difficult to make out the rest of his features because of his scruffy dark beard. Quickly ripping the tape from his mouth, he removed the gag. And while he cut away the tape on his hands and feet, the guy licked his lips and let out a strangled, “Muchas gracias.”

“Who are you? Why are you held prisoner?”

“Armando Allegretto. I joined Ramiro’s gang. We’re out to get rid of Gunther and his gunslingers. Gunther’s men captured me about a week ago, while I snooped around that newly arrived yacht in search of weapons for the rebels. Those thugs wanted me to take them to Ramiro’s hideout in the jungle. Because I won’t do it, they tortured me...tried to starve me to death. Then they tried poisoning me with snake bites.” Looking down at his shabby attire, he gave Elejandro a wry grin. “Just look at me, I’m a bloody mess. My only belongings are this stained shirt and these torn shorts. I haven’t been home for weeks.”

“I’ve got my reasons for being naked, but you don’t want to know them,” Elejandro said. He reached for a blanket lying across one of the hammocks and wrapped it around his waist.

“I know you didn’t strip down for sex. No woman would set foot in this place.” Armando’s chuckle came out dry and cynical.

Elejandro tried to get into Armando’s head and read his thoughts. “Do you know anything about a gringo called Jerry? Young guy, about twenty-five? Gunther’s men snatched him from my compound on the other side of the island—”

“Si! Si!” Armando’s thick black eyebrows shot up and astonishment touched his bloodshot brown eyes. “I owe a lot to that guy. He brought me water the day they kept him here—fed me, too. I have no idea how he managed to get food from that miserable tyrant of a cook. Jerry was Gunther’s prisoner, too, but not always tied up. And they let him hang on to his pet monkey. Weird, eh?”

Speechless for a few seconds, words got lodged in Elejandro’s throat. “Did he tell you why Gunther kidnapped him?”

“Fraid not. But I can tell you where he is now. A driller came here to find out what his next job was, and I overheard what he told one of my captors. He’d just finished building a chamber hundreds of feet down in the Zoala cave...a jail cell for three Latinos. One night, when all the guys involved with bringing out the treasures were asleep in their bunkhouse, and only two of Gunther’s men stood guard at the entrance to the mine, they’d tried to use dynamite to cause a cave-in. Anyway, before the guy finished making the door to the jail, he said a couple of Gunther’s thugs brought in a gringo called Jerry.”

A dark energy full of hate flooded Elejandro's thoughts. "Any idea where that cave is, and how many of Gunther's men are out there?"

"All my life, I've never gone near that part of the mountain. Bad Karma. And now Gunther melts our ceremonial objects and sun shields and makes ingots out of them. So you can see... my people have lost their way. The Incas declared it a sacred site. So the villagers who loot the Zoala cave know they'll reap the bad seeds they have sewn. A debt that goes on from lifetime to lifetime."

"That evil demented bastard! He's at the core of every rotten thing going on around here, isn't he?"

"We're all slaves until we get rid of him. Ramiro's gathering a strong fighting team. I'm going back into the jungle where his guys hang out." Armando walked gingerly as they headed for the window Elejandro had used to break in.

"How many thugs watch over this place?"

"A couple. They've been checking on me every hour."

"Good to know. I'm determined to find out where that cave is. There must be a map around here somewhere. I've got to rescue Jerry."

Armando saluted him before he climbed out the window. "Good luck getting Jerry away from those devils."

Hanging back for a moment, Elejandro made sure no one planned to sneak up on him while he transformed into a jaguar. After he shifted, he padded softly

through the living room where the scent of sweat, bodily fluids and smoke hung heavily in the air. The cat's eyes took note of the stairs leading up to a second floor. Once he reached the top, he furtively slithered into the first bedroom on his belly and stopped at the side of the bed. On checking out the heavy-set gringo sleeping there, he accidentally clamped his claws onto the man's foot.

The pistoleiro let out a yelp. Grabbing his gun, pants and shirt, he made for the door.

He must've made quite a ruckus downstairs because the sound of heavy boots clumping up the stairs meant the other thug was roused to action.

Bounding down the hall to an open window, the cat gauged the distance to a large branch of an arbutan tree. After penetrating the darkness with seven times the power of human vision, he leapt onto the branch with great precision. Relaxing for a few minutes, he found the whirr, whine, rustle and buzz, coming from the forest comforting and refreshing. But laying back and enjoying his surroundings wasn't an option.

Suddenly aware of two men stumbling around in the rotting vegetation on the ground, the jaguar froze and listened with ears capable of hearing five times sharper than a human.

"When Gunther gets back here, he's going to kill me for letting that jaguar get upstairs." The cat recognized the big-eared man with a neck the size of a tire.

Earlier on, he'd slept at the entrance of the huge barn. When he removed his faded green army cap with its small visor and used it to slap at the sand flies, the jaguar saw a reddish-brown bald head glistening with perspiration.

"The jaguar could've killed you, Chuck. You're supposed to stay awake when it's my turn to take a nap." The short stocky guy spoke in a hoarse voice as he aimed his flashlight in all directions. Just inside his mouth, he'd jammed what looked like a wad of coca leaves, and his chin protruded eerily when his flashlight beamed up onto his face.

"Where in the hell did that animal go?" giant neck asked. "One minute, it's upstairs. The next minute it's gone."

"A big black cat in Gunther's house... It'll keep those miners gossiping for weeks. That jaguar's obviously not avoiding humans, so no one's safe in Luizao anymore."

"Well, maybe it'll eat those rebels. Those buggers hiding out in the jungle are raising hell at night...dumping logs on the airstrip, raiding the small warehouses...even knocking out our guys with darts dipped in some kind of crap that puts them to sleep. I saw a guy after those damn bugs chomped on him for a few hours. Mosquitoes the size of paper clips with extra-long stingers bored right through his clothes, vampire bats peed on his face... monkeys, too. God, he was a mess."

“And no one’s safe out at that goddamn cave either. Those Latinos are causing trouble out there, too. That’s where the boss took Jerry, the monkey-lover. I hear they threw him in a jail deep in the mountain. That jerk caused me no end of trouble when he was here. He wandered all around the place and was only tied up at night. Why the boss gave him so much freedom and let him keep that goddamn monkey, I have no idea. I even caught him feeding the prisoner.”

“Speaking of prisoners...let’s get back inside and check on that asshole.”

When the two men disappeared into the house, the cat continued his investigation of the structures on the periphery of the jungle. Two long communal dwellings made with lumber and thatched roofs captured his interest next.

At one of them, a guy came to the door and turned on the outside light. Because he had that same ruthless look the jaguar knew this shelter housed Gunther’s men. After lighting a cigarette and taking a few puffs, he flicked some ash and took out his flashlight. As he struggled through the undergrowth toward the outhouse, a beam hit the cat’s eyes. The guy stood stock-still for a moment, frozen in a kind of morbid fascination. The cat froze, too. Suddenly whirling around, the thug ran back toward the bunkhouse.

The jaguar continued on his way behind the makeshift building. When his whiskers and the hair on his face picked up on an explosion of vibrations, he followed the scent and sound of drunken humans. Closing in on the Scuttling

Scorpion, he remained in the shadows at the side of the establishment. Focusing on the well-lit area at the front of the bar, he saw two men fighting.

Emilio again! The vicious bugger now pounded on another young bearded man with wild unruly brown hair and black shiny eyes. He yanked his gold teeth out of his mouth, tore off his watch and ripped the rings from his fingers.

The cat followed Emilio as he dragged his victim to his digging site. While keeping well hidden in the shadows, he watched Gunther's hired ruffian ransack the miner's shack. He took the bottles of gold flakes he found buried in the shallow ground, and the nuggets the guy had stashed in his backpack. Before he left, the thug smashed all the bottles of liquor and flattened the hut.

The jaguar followed Emilio as he made his way down to the river where hundreds of string hammocks, with campfires beside them, lined the shore. Divers used them while they'd rested between their two-hour shifts. After the thug dropped his sack of stolen gold onto the beach, ripped off his shirt, soaked it in the water and used it to wipe his face and torso, the jaguar let out a grunt. Swinging around, Emilio found himself face to face with his worst nightmare.

Controlling the cat's killer instinct proved to be especially difficult because, at first, Elejandro agreed with his power animal's decision to set the thug's clothes on fire. By changing his mind, he confused the cat. But, when lightning lit up the sky, as the cat dragged the bleary-eyed disoriented brute to a bonfire, the beast

listened to his human side and handed down a lighter sentence. Lifting the guy high in the air, the cat swung him over the flames a few times before he dumped him in the river.

Emilio, in a flurry of violent splashes and panicked flesh, struggled to the shore and ran, gasping and shivering, to the nearest bar. Elejandro knew, without a shred of doubt, Emilio's time as Gunther's henchman had ended.

Robina slept soundly when Elejandro reached the raft around four in the morning. Running his hand over his face and finding he still displayed jaguar's muzzle, he used a large leaf as a mask before he entered. Exhausted, he fell onto the bed. Before he fell asleep, his thoughts lingered on Emilio's last victim, the young brutalized miner. In his mind's eye, he could see him dashing down to the water's edge, gathering up his sack of gold and making a dash for the airport.

Chapter Six

At breakfast, Elejandro gave Robina the information he'd overheard last night. "A guy held prisoner in Gunther's headquarters told me Jerry's been moved to a jail inside the Zoala cave. And I heard two of those gringo underlings say the same thing."

Robina sat bolt upright and let out a whoop. "Cave? Cave? Did they mention where it is?"

"No. So we've got to do more scouting. Once we're on the miner's after-hours street of dreams, we can blend in again. It's not as if we haven't rehearsed our parts. Wandering around the local drinking denizens like some half-witted drunk, that'll be my undercover act, so no one should take any interest in me."

"But I don't feel safe. As the new single, available gal in town, my every action and reaction is carefully monitored. Wearing only two scraps of clothing and carrying no weapon, do you realize how far you're stretching my boundaries? I was begging for attention in those skimpy clothes I wore last night. Those guys were desperate to experience a momentary reward for a hard day's work, so I was bound to be popular."

“All guys, that goes for Gunther’s men, too, are off guard when they get their lower regions to do their thinking. Get as much information as you can.”

There he goes again with his litany. Just do it, just do it. “I don’t know, Elejandro. Tipsy or not, some of those guys will be desperate to get into my pants. And why not? I’m going to be dressed like I’m ready for some action.”

“Last night in the Scuttling Scorpion, those guys were eager to enjoy some bloodletting. But when those wild men got a glimpse of you, the aggression dissipated. I can’t believe it...in the middle of all that testosterone, you got their undivided attention. You’re able to send out thoughts and change the behavior of others. You’ve gained improvement in your telepathic powers. Come on, acknowledge it.”

Even a blind sow can stumble across an acorn once in a while. “Okay, I’ll try. But from my point of view, they saw a sexy-looking babe, and their gonads took over for what little brain function they were operating on at the time. When I realized what kind of a situation I’d walked into, pretending to be fearless was the only way to go. But tonight, we’re going to the different bar.”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to hang around.”

“You better! I can’t present myself as a super cool babe—or should I say red hot babe—if I don’t have a supportive male close by. One who’ll do everything in his power to keep me safe.”

“I know I’m putting you in danger. Gunther’s malevolence has stirred many miners to revolt. They hide out in the jungle and make sporadic attacks on the mercenaries. Tension is high and all hell might break loose any time now. But helping Ramiro’s men is second on our list. Our first job is to free Jerry. And getting close to the miners when their tongues are loose is the only way we’ll find out the location of that cave.”

Robina took the small wooden bowl he gave her and sipped a little of the yellow carbonated drink before she got up from their bed of leaves. “This tastes like cider. What’s in it?”

“It’s largely corn fermented with my saliva. I chewed the corn into a paste and initiated the fermentation.”

“Yuk, thinking of you spitting out corn kernels is kind of disgusting.”

“Most of the families in Luizao make their own beer that way. It’s called chicha. You had some at the Centro Café that was industrially prepared. Come on, now. Have some more.”

At first, she continued to sip. The unsanitized way of making it made it difficult for her to do a chug-a-lug. But damn it anyway, it was Elejandro’s spit and the drink tasted great.

And, if his saliva caused chemical changes in corn, why not her enzymatic makeup? Maybe she’d become a shape shifter if she hung around him long enough.

He already treated her like a psychic capable of perfecting her telepathic ability even more.

After she drained the bowl, Elejandro laughed. “See. Goes down nice and easy, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. I have to admit it. Chicha is real tasty. But now I need to wash up in the creek before I color my hair brown and cover my skin with your self-tanning lotion.”

Elejandro turned around slowly like some male model on a catwalk. “All I need are a couple of finishing touches to give me the required grubby wasted look. I’ll roll around in the mud and rub a bit of piranha skin behind my ears.”

“I’m sure you’ll fit in just fine. Now I have to get going.”

“Don’t forget what I told you about the stingrays. By shuffling your feet along the bottom of the stream, it’ll give them a chance to get out of your way. But, if you get anywhere near an anaconda, the earth will shake, rain will pour down and lightning will strike you.”

“Hey, give me a break.”

“Just kidding. Don’t worry about them. They’re very slow and shy.”

She laughed, as she pulled her sexy costume from her backpack and placed it on the bed. “So am I. But when I’m really hungry...”

“You’ll take a bite out of me. Right?”



After they hiked a few blocks along the dirt road running through Luizao, Robina pointed to a sign hammered into a tree that read “Wild Boar Drinking Hole.”

“Just listen to that sound. It’s so raw and fresh.” She’d never been so eager to dance. Even in God-forsaken dives where sweat-soaked denizens drugged on booze allowed a whirlwind of sound to stir up energy they really didn’t own, her body wanted to join in. “Doesn’t it get to you? Let’s go in and mingle.”

“It’s music born in poverty. Does it get to me? Sure. Music is part of my life. For me, dancing eases the way into ecstasy—a transformation into my inner jaguar.”

“Is your jaguar moving around inside you right now? Sometime soon, I’d like to watch you shift.” *St. Peter on a popsicle stick!* Did she really want to treat his jaguar like a household pet?

“I’m sure that can be arranged, and soon. In order for us to level the playing field with Gunther’s team of jackals, we’re going to need help. So my jaguar is bound to burst upon the scene when we need his strength.”

The bar they walked into fit the same specifications as the Scuttling Scorpion. Women wore colorful sundresses, skimpy tops and shorts, and the majority of the miners wore t-shirts and jeans. Leaning against a thick slab of

wood that made up the rustic standing-room-only bar, one extremely good looking man pulsed with an undulating sensual energy. Hungrily gobbling up her body as if it were a bowl of ice cream, he waited for her to give him permission to dive right in.

The avid gamblers at the card tables showed no interest in skipping the light fandango, and a soccer game was the one and only focus of the group watching the TV.

She noticed how the gamblers who played cards captured the undivided attention of a burly, half-naked bruiser, obviously the bouncer. In one hand he held a club and kept hitting his other hand with it. Rolls of fat—back home, Sheena Colquhoun would assess him as a guy who suffered from chronic biscuit toxicity—flowed down his wide framed body. His thick muscular legs held up his weight—no problem—and, in spite of his obesity, he came across as a deadly combatant.

Ignoring Elejandro, a young dark Spaniard, with his hair slicked back and his t-shirt and jeans freshly laundered, reached for Robina's hand. She smiled at him, and he led her over to the dance area and pulled her into position. When the zabumba, accordion and triangle began to beat out a frantic rhythm, he swung her out into the middle of the floor.

Her partner guided her easily through some complex movements because

they shared the floor with only ten other couples. His ability to take her through a number of variations on the basic shuffle and slide surprised her. But relaxing and floating on air wasn't possible. Her nervous system, always at the ready for the first sign of trouble, kept her wary and alert. When the music stopped, the flashy Don Juan grabbed her by the arm. "You're a great dancer. Stay with me for a while. Okay?"

Robina broke free of his grasp. "After that dance I need a quick drink." She didn't wait for his answer. Quickly making her way to the bar, she asked for a shot of rum.

"The same for me," said her mesmerized Lord of the Dance.

"Are you a miner?"

"No. Gunther hired me. I'm a jeweler from Costa del Sol. My job is to find out what materials besides gold are found in those ancient artifacts they're bringing out of the Zoala cave. I give Gunther a rough estimate of the object's value. He's not interested in the artistic value because he melts them down."

"Maybe you're just the guy who can tell me how long the miners will be able to cough up enough gold flakes and art work to keep Gunther happy."

After their plastic cups of rum were set in front of them, he grabbed his drink and drank it in one gulp. "How the hell do I know?" The music started up, and he gave her a nudge. "Drink up. Let's dance."

“I’m sorry. I choke up when I drink too fast.” He treated her as if she were a woman uneducated in the ways of a smooth operator like him.

Raising his hand, he indicated he wanted another drink. “No more talking! Drink your drink.” His tone came across as rough, and impatient.

So he found her annoyingly slow at downing her drink. *Well, that just chaps my ass.* The guy would be of no further help to her, so she didn’t intend on wasting any more time with him.

When his drink arrived, she lifted her skirt. “I’ve got to check my hem. I think I ripped it.” Her dance partner found her thong absolutely mesmerizing. Distracted, he didn’t notice her free hand removing a small packet from the lining of her skirt, open it with her nail and slip the contents into his drink. A few minutes later, like a man suffering from a blow to his arrogant head, he crumbled to the ground.

In order to enjoy vertical sex on the dance floor, with lyrics about passion and romance ringing in her ear, she needed a special partner: Elejandro. In the arms of strangers, an odd kind of tension made it impossible to completely surrender to the music.

Felix, a talkative slightly drunken miner, turned out to be the next man to sign her dance card. Barely moving his position as his body throbbed to the forro music, he never stopped talking. *Ten words a second, gusting to fifty.* Not too irritating

actually, his Spanish held a musical lilt that sounded quite pleasant in spite of his tendency to slur his words.

“Things are going crazy around here,” he said. “The stores in town are cheating everybody. Cigarettes, food, medicine and clothes...it’s robbery...the gold flakes they charge. Remember when we got most of our stuff by trading and gift-giving?” Robina nodded. “Gunther’s piling up the gold ingots, but I’ve already used up my stash. I just spend and spend and fritter it all away. Buying stuff with gold flakes—what a crazy way to do business.”

“When you were in the market, did you notice a strange gringo? He sure wasn’t born here. Wearing an earring and a short ponytail, he’d be hard to miss—”

“No. The only gringos I see are Gunther’s men. A couple of them are always hanging around the market. And they don’t wear earrings.”

“I can’t wait for our guys to run those thieves off our land. Gunther has no right to remove those ancient golden treasures. They’re part of our Incan Empire heritage. To have them looted—”

Felix stopped and wiped his head with his shirt. Pushing her away, he scowled at her. “Mierda! Don’t look at me. No way. I’m not joining up with Ramiro’s gang. You’re looking to be killed, aren’t you?” Releasing her hand, he made for the exit.

Elejandro sidled up to Robina. “You don’t want to embarrass me with a

rejection, do you?” He glanced around at the noisy groups. The guys will notice and think you’re getting a little choosy. Now teach me how to dance the forro.”

She blew out a relaxing breath and loosened her tight stomach muscles. “My pleasure. It’s easy. Your right leg goes between my legs. The idea is to stay wedged together. Real close.” With his deep gold fiery eyes burning into hers and dark hair flowing down his molded bronzed back, he was indisputably sensually magnificent. Mentally blotting out the noise and the dangerous atmosphere, she wrapped herself up in his muscular arms and vibrant energy.

While they were in position waiting for the music to start up again, she pushed her newly colored brown hair off her forehead and looked up at him. “Hips...pay attention to the hips. That’s the main idea when it comes to the forro.”

The music started and her right hand held his left one. His right hand slipped around her back, and her left hand circled his neck. Left, left, right, right. Shuffle and slide. With their thighs glued together, moving as one, she encouraged him to vary direction and dance in a circle like some of the others. He surprised her when he spun her around.

Part of the music now, completely blind to the dancers around her, she poured herself more and more into the rhythmic beat. The stifling, violently hot, humid environs no longer bothered her. With her hips grinding against his and setting off a painful torturous pleasure between her legs, she quickly became

caught up in the frantic rhythm. No doubt about it: forro was unquestionably the sexiest folk dance on earth.

In Spanish, the band members sang songs that spoke of longing, jealousy and passion, and she wrapped herself up in a rapturous trance. As an alien in this island of impenetrable jungle, she was surprised by the way she responded to the rhythm of this local dance. Forro was in her blood. All she needed was the chance to experience it.

She knew Elejandro's Spanish blood—with a heavy splash of African roots—was caught up in its wildness, too. He claimed a good deal of the dance floor as his own, completely lost in the moment.

Desperate to celebrate her youth and good health after her close brush with death last week, she'd been dying to be swirled off and carried away by the music. Responding to her needs, she entangled herself in his arms. Grinding her pelvis against his, she allowed the wildness of his animal spirit to enter her body and drug her. Intoxicated, she fed off his mind-bending energy and allowed his sparkling golden eyes and earthy scent to relay magical heated messages. With his thigh insinuated between hers, the syncopated rhythm swept her up in a whirlwind of passion.

With Elejandro's heat running red hot, she sensed the beast within him. His aroma, thick, rich, sharp and musky, awakened something inside her that

produced a rush of cosmic all-embracing energy. With her cheek against his, strong vibrations assailed her. Tingly electrical flashes zapped her cells, tissue and bones in an increasingly dizzying onslaught. Entwined in his exotic aura, she danced with the jaguar, the symbol of femininity, sleekness and sensuality.

Elejandro's gasp brought her out of her reverie. When the music stopped, he spoke in a whisper. "Look at the man standing at the far end of the bar. The one with the wild unruly black hair. That's Gunther. I'm sure of it. The picture Leon gave us...the mouth full of gold teeth, tight Ray-Bans...short, stocky, the muscles of a weight lifter. Even the scar pulling down the side of his mouth fits."

Robina froze for a moment. "He knows what you look like, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. He probably does. If his boys spied on Jerry, it's only natural to assume they monitored me for awhile and took my picture." Pulling his hair back, he tied it in a knot at the back of his head and put his baseball hat back on, dipping the brim low in front.

A sickening chill raced through her. She'd experienced it once before when she found herself hopelessly lost in the jungle. Taking Elejandro's hand, she led him away from the perimeter of the dance floor and into the center where sweaty bodies picked up the beat of the next song. She said into his ear, "Just push your head into my hair and let me lead you out of here."

Moments later, when a drunken guy directed a few lewd comments their

way as they slipped out the entrance, she hoped Gunther wouldn't be too curious about the objects of the jerk's derision.

Once they were well hidden in the jungle, she searched Elejandro's blazing eyes and pushed past the natural barrier he'd set up and scanned his thoughts. "You're worried that we won't get to Jerry in time. You think he's going to be killed, don't you?"

With his expression tight with strain, he nodded. "The longer Jerry's a prisoner, the more likely Gunther's men are to kill the kid. On the plus side, Davi, one of the avid soccer fans, told me where the Zoala cave is—even gave me two maps. One is directions to the cave, and the other is a rough sketch of the inside of the cave. So I know the passages and side branches we have to navigate in order to reach the chamber used as a jail. Davi said flooding eats away at the sandstone ceilings of the underground tunnels and solid ground is often less than an inch thick. So, if you'd rather not plumb the depths of the earth, feel free to stay here."

"I'm the gal watching your back, remember? So let's get back to the raft. If we're hiking out to that cave tomorrow, we need our sleep."



The following morning, Robina, bathed in sweat, followed Elejandro along an overgrown muddy trail leading to the Zoala cave. According to Davi, three of Gunther's gunmen were responsible for two homicides and a suspicious pool hall

fire during the past week. The miners retaliated by hitting the thugs with tranquilizing darts and their bodies were left at the mercy of the insects and monkeys. Consequently, the escalating tension between the miners and gunslingers grew more intense with each passing day. Some families were in fear of their lives when they heard about the murders and ran off to live in the jungle.

As they walked along an animal trail parallel to the river, she heard the popping sounds of the exhaling dolphins and visualized their domed foreheads and bottlenoses. On catching a glimpse of a four-foot caiman splashing near the water's edge as it made a meal of a large catfish, she wondered why it repulsed her. It didn't attack humans, although the black caimans were not to be trusted.

When a strange smell off to the left of the trail caught her attention, she knelt down into the philodendrons, ferns and moss and stared into the tangled brush. *Well, I'll be hornswoggled!* "Elejandro, there's a body here. I don't think the guy's been dead long. The bugs are just starting to check him out."

Elejandro flew over to her and dropped down. "Oh, my God, it's Davi. What if they overheard him talking to me? Dammit anyway."

"And then, again, maybe that wasn't why they killed him. You said he planned to join up with Ramiro's men."

"Yeah—could be. There's a quiver over there in the moss...the killers must've taken his darts. So maybe the guys who killed him were his targets." Digging into

his pocket, he pulled out a piece of paper. “According to this map, we’ve still got at least a mile to go before we reach the cave. And for some time now, we’ve been followed. So we don’t have time to bury the body.”

She glanced around. “We’re being followed?”

“Maybe Gunther’s got his men patrolling this trail, on the lookout for members of Ramiro’s gang. In any case, this is an opportune time to have my jaguar scare the hell out of those ruffians.

“Now let’s get busy and cut some vines. When my jaguar has our stalkers frozen in place, you can use the vines to tie them to a tree. Before their cronies find them, they’ll be ready to get the hell off the island.”

The underlying bitterness in his tone had Robina mentally scanning Elejandro’s thoughts with focus and intent. Fiery gnawing questions concerning Gunther’s treatment of Jerry came across loud and clear. Was Jerry suffering from physical pain? Was he being tortured? Moments later, she read thoughts concerned with Gunther and his threat to the aching beauty of the island. The rainforest was the result of an intimate harmony billions of years in the making. To destroy it, was done at man’s peril. Its medicinal plants, many of which were still undiscovered, meant little to the greedy brute. To find gold, he’d rip up the island from one end to the other.

Elejandro removed his shorts and t-shirt and put them in her backpack,

focusing on the man's thoughts proved impossible for two reasons. He'd blocked her mental intrusion and he stood before her in his birthday suit. *Sweet mango jelly. Just look at him.* His perfection of hard muscle and dark skin mesmerized her. Her insides heated up. She breathed in short hard rasps and her pulse quickened. Inside her body, her muscles tensed. Thinking of this glorious human transforming himself into a wild untamed beast filled her with both trepidation and excitement.

"Try not to act alarmed when I'm in the process of changing. You told me you'd like to watch my transformation. Well, now's your chance. So stay close. I'm going to move off the trail and slip into the jungle."

"Right now, those guys are savoring the thrill of the hunt, aren't they?" As she followed him, a war of emotions raged within her: from anticipation and buoyancy to dread and uncertainty. "They could easily have killed us by now. But why are we targeted?"

"There's a lot of unrest among the men working in the cave. Davi told me some of the guys work as slowly as they possibly can, and are ready to turn on Gunther's men any time now. So they might think we're intent on stirring up the workers. Or maybe they know we're looking for Jerry."

Robina wobbled on rubbery legs. Alternately thrilling and scaring the bejesus out of her was the thought of the unnerving transformation about to take place in Elejandro's body. A tremendous power would break free and transform

him into a jaguar. For a sudden change like that—bones stretching, crunching and bending—there had to be pain involved. Was there a transfer of power, too? Or did the man remain in control of the beast?

The whole shape changing phenomenon struck her as chaotic. All too aware of the frightening vibrations in the air, her apprehension mounted.

When Elejandro stood in a grassy spot near the base of a Brazil nut tree that soared into the sky, she came to an abrupt stop. Breathing in shallow quick gasps, she tried to steady her erratic pulse.

The long black hair on Elejandro's head quickly disappeared and short, silky fur took its place. An elongated jaw shot forward, saliva flowed, black lips spread and four-inch fangs forced his mouth to widen. His face broadened, and the black fur on his head gave way to large rounded ears sitting straight up like a crown. The dark markings of rosettes, with broken borders and a spot in the center, were barely visible in the thick black fur running over the cat's legs and arms. Standing on four powerful clawed paws, the beast arched his back and rubbed up against her. *Well, if that don't take the rag off the bush.* His musky foreign scent and the intensity of his almond shaped, glittering yellow-green eyes with their long silken eyelashes caught her up in a web of wonder and beauty, When he stuck out a downy tongue and let out a quiet snarl, she knew she'd see the world with an open mind and new eyes from this moment on.



Robina hid among the shadows and shrubbery while the cat listened intently for sounds of the two men walking on the decaying leaves littering the ground. Digging into the base of a large-leafed mahogany tree, the cat began to climb. Like the constant shade at the forest floor, just a dim light managed to peek through the thick foliage above. Halfway up a hundred and fifty foot trunk, his eyes became more and more accustomed to the ever-increasing bursts of sunlight. Once atop the canopy, the ultimate predator blinked several times before he succeeded in adjusting his eyesight to the high light intensity.

Up in this treetop meadow there existed an undiscovered realm of plants. The small sweet smelling flowers of the mahogany tree were white, and the spectacular colors of the orchids were in sharp contrast. From this vantage point, seeds were blown far and wide throughout the jungle. An abundance of insects and animals thrived up here, too. Everything they needed was found in this place of hanging gardens, so they never went down to the forest floor.

Two three-foot red macaws landed on the top of a nearby tree. While keeping their eyes on the jaguar, they began to break open nut pods. At the same time, an eagle swooped down, snatching a sloth with its claws and flying off to eat its prey in private.

Stealthily, with the approaching footsteps spurring him on, the jaguar made

his way along the top of the forest canopy. Stunned by the grunting of another jaguar, he peered through the dappled light trickling through the huge leaves. The powerfully built beast lounged about fifteen feet away and, with his keen eyesight he saw scars on her beautiful reddish-yellow rosette-spotted body. They indicated she'd been in more than a few scraps.

Shots rang out and bullets flew up into the canopy like a slap to the face. The cat reacted instantly. In a matter of seconds, he made it halfway down the trunk.

He stopped in his tracks when he glimpsed a colorful blur of movement above his head. The powerfully built graceful body of the strange jaguar, now a shapeless blob as it crashed through the foliage, landed with a thud that shook the surrounding jungle.

The black cat's energy and iron-will were now directed at two threatening forces. A searing raw rage cancelled out everything except an urge to kill.

Pouncing on the taller man, the cat pierced the guy's temporal bones and delivered a fatal blow to his brain. The other killer reached for his gun but, before he could use it, the beast sheared off his head.

Following the kills, the jaguar carried the tall thug's body—the head a mangled mess of bone, skin, muscle and veins—up a nearby tree and hid it among the thick, prickly palm leaves. Then he dragged the other body about twenty-five

feet into the jungle, dropped him on the ground and left him to the carnivores.

Transformed back into his naked human body, Elejandro recalled how the beast had overridden his wishes. Mad with hate, in a flurry of snarling lips and yellow fangs, the cat launched himself in a rushing charge at the humans' heads. Claws ripped, fangs snapped, bit and slashed. But, in spite of his beast ignoring his command, he'd found himself elated during the kills, almost joyous. The surge of bloodlust and violent frenzy extolled the sheer joy of battle.

Robina handed him his clothes. "Damn it, you're totally wiped out now. The energy needed to perform those kills must've been incredible. Her eyes shone with growing fear, and Elejandro knew that fear was of his jaguar. "No problem. I don't suffer any permanent physical damage after a shift. The jaguar is just another form of me."

"The way your beast tore the skulls off those two men...how did it make you feel?"

"I experienced everything the jaguar felt. The pure animal fury, the ferocious energy and the out-of-control bloodlust. I found it both terrifying and exhilarating. Fangs and claws are gifts of nature, much better weapons than bows and arrows, knives or guns."

She moved in closer to him. "Your cat could've cornered those two creeps and given me a chance to tie them up. That was the plan."

“Those thugs shot a female cat, and the beast couldn’t contain his fury. On the plus side, we’re still undercover. When Gunther’s men come looking for their missing gang members, they’ll find Davi’s body and a dead golden female jaguar. If they’re able to find the bodies of the two gunmen, they’ll know a jaguar killed them. But the female jaguar’s dead, so they’ll know another jaguar lurks along the trail that leads to the cave.”

“Well, one thing’s for sure. Gunther will soon know he doesn’t have his finger on everything going on around here.”

“The thing is, those hit men weren’t tailing us; they were after the female jaguar. They sell the hide of soft thick golden fur. The claws and fangs are valuable, too.

“Anyway, knowing a black jaguar’s still on the loose in Luizao will have Gunther’s gang a little edgy. And that’s a good thing, too.” He gave Robina a wry half-smile.

“A black jaguar in Luizao? I never heard anything about that.” She assessed him with a questioning squint.

“I changed shape in the early morning hours after you broke up the brawl at the Scuttling Scorpion a couple of nights ago. You were dog tired after you’d hiked out to the makeshift airport late that evening, so I let you sleep.

“One of the gunslingers saw a black jaguar skulking around inside Gunther’s

headquarters. And Emilio, the guy who beat a miner to a pulp, he'll be talking about a black jaguar, too. The beast scared the hell out of him. That kind of news spreads fast."

"Damn. I forgot to tell you about some other news that's making the rounds. A female golden jaguar escaped from a caged-in area. According to Veronica, the waitress who sold me her camera, her neighbor had taken care of it since it was a cub."

"And she'll probably not go far. She'll always know where she can get food if she's desperate."

"So that dead jaguar could be her."

"Damn shame. That guy who owned her should've freed her when she was very young. It's just another example of people trying to make pets out of wild creatures."

Elejandro picked up the pace and began to glide through the overgrown trail. Moments later, he heard the sound of men's voices. Turning, he put his finger to his lips and directed Robina to follow him. Plunging into the jungle, he was thankful he didn't have to use his machete to push down the dense vegetation. Silence was more important than speed because he wanted to stay close to the trail leading to the cave.

Off in the distance, he heard thunder, and he knew they were in for a storm.

Ten minutes later, Elejandro stopped dead when lightning up ahead was followed closely by a thunder clap and a loud thud. “That sounded like a huge tree crashing to the ground. There’ll be no fires if it’s surrounded by damp vegetation. So let’s hope that’s the case. If it landed at the edge of the forest near the ocean, the fire will spread. The outside edges of the jungle are tinder dry.

“We’re near the cave now, and judging from that blanket of smoke and the foul smell in the air, some vegetation caught fire. Don’t breathe too deeply. If you do, you’ll choke.”

Robina coughed and rubbed her eyes. Pulling her damp shirt away from her chest, she wiped her forehead with her arm. “If the smoke doesn’t kill us, it’ll serve as a diversion.”

“It’ll probably be a short window of opportunity. There’s no shortage of powerful hoses in Luizao, so maybe they’ve got some out here.”

By the time they reached their destination, Elejandro saw layers of ash everywhere. “I don’t see any of Gunther’s men. So, lucky for us, they’re working on the fire.” Stopping for a moment, he shared a bottle of water with a sooty and red-eyed Robina. “The winds are picking up by the minute. We can’t feel it so much under the canopy, but believe me, it’s gaining power. If the fire’s not immediately brought under control, it’ll gain momentum.”

Chapter Seven

Not far from the sticky, slippery, wet gray mud at the cave entrance were the buildings used for storage and cooking. Shivering at the thought of climbing deep into the bowels of the mountain, Robina poked her head through the opening of the cave. Stepping inside, her latent claustrophobia surfaced so they took a moment to don their headlamps. Thankfully, the inside of the cave reflected the average temperature of the island—around seventy-five degrees.

A half-naked dark young man swished by her carrying what looked like an arm full of golden flowers. Glancing at her boots, overalls and headlamp, his expression didn't change. Turning to Elejandro, who followed her, she gave him the thumbs up. "I passed my first test. That guy took me for a worker."

A tall, skeletally thin older man completely ignored them as he pushed a cart holding a large golden statue covered in muck toward the exit. Right behind him, a young man emerged from an inclined shaft with a canvas sack full of clanging metal. The air reeked of bats because they'd disturbed their roosting area in a warren off to their left. Wings whooshed above her head and made her anxious. She wondered if Elejandro, who took the lead, knew how to cure rabies.

Behind Elejandro, she trudged along a six-foot high passageway for another sixty feet. Then joined him as he slid down a steeply inclined tunnel—no railings or ladders to ease the fall. Water seeped in on all sides. Nearly banging her head on a large rocky overhang, she let out a few expletives. “How far do we have to go before we get to where Jerry’s being held?”

“If Davi’s map is accurate, it’s not far from here.”

Off to the right, a short, middle-aged balding man wearing metal-rimmed glasses worked with a fine brush. Bare to the waist, he wore only shorts and runners. Water dripping from above trickled down his dark muscular body.

As they walked by him, the guy stopped working, wiped his face with a rag and directed his gaze at Elejandro. “I’ve got myself one hell of a job. The ongoing erosion has this gold headdress buried in sandstone. Gunther says we gotta get the gold pieces out without denting them. I don’t know why. He just melts ‘em down.”

“So I’ve heard,” Elejandro said. “Sure hope we find something of value.”

“Then you gotta go deeper and deeper into the cave. The trail crosses streams and goes alongside cliffs. And the complicated series of tunnels—unbelievable! Parts of this cave have never been explored. And remember, there are cave-ins. Ocean water seeps in everywhere and erodes the limestone and clay. Anyway—good luck.” Picking up a thin brush, he began to sweep away the sand from the large ornamental piece.

Robina turned to Elejandro after they were out of earshot, “Did you see how banged up he was? All those scars on his face, bruises on his arms, legs and chest, skin lesions on his hands...and his runners are soaking-wet. The guy should be in a hospital. And that spinachy smell...I’m sure it was coca.”

“Yeah, the wad of coca leaves between his cheek and gums helps him breathe where oxygen levels are low. It gives a mild buzz much like coffee. Gunther’s forced the villagers to work in here for some time. So now, like we’ve just been told, they’re forced to snake farther and farther into the mountain.”

Stooping into a hunchback position, Robina slowly made her way along a dirt tunnel only four and a half feet high. Further hampering her progress was a significant collapse of sand.

After aiming his headlamp off to the left, Elejandro turned to her. “According to the map, this drop will take us into another short channel.”

She let out a groan after she dropped down. “This channel’s nothing more than a passageway—it’s probably just a natural cavern.” Crawling on all fours, she found the tunnel oppressive, dank, dark and medieval. *Hell’s bells and buckets of blood.* Water dripped down a recently shored-up area of rock and wooden pillars. The chances of being entrapped by a roof collapse or falling through the wet ground loomed as strong possibilities. Like a sharp pain, a rush of panic slammed through her; claws of doom threatened to freeze her in place.

In an offshoot of the narrow crawl space, a vaulted space fronted by a heavy wooden door, had Elejandro jumping up and walking over to it. “This should be the jail. What do you say? Should we knock or walk right in?”

“Your choice.” Standing, she shone her headlamp in all directions. Cripes! She’d picked up some kind of dark brutal energy—*someone with a thumping gizzard for a heart*—and it filled her with trepidation.

Elejandro banged on the door. No one answered, so he turned the knob. “It’s locked.”

“Hey, what’s going on here?” A short, stocky guy came out of nowhere.

Robina wondered why she’d failed to see him. Then it dawned on her. With her headlamp on high, there was a dark space in the middle of the beam. Add to that the shadows clinging to the guy’s body as if they craved his presence. Dark-skinned, with light brown eyes gleaming with annoyance, he stepped in front of Elejandro and pushed the switch on his headlamp to off.

“You’re one of those damn shit-disturbers raising hell around here,” he said, “Well Gunther’s had it up to here with you guys.”

Robina pushed in between the tough and Elejandro. “You’re way off base here. We’re ready for work.”

The guy’s eyes whipped back and forth from Elejandro to Robina. After knocking Elejandro’s headlamp to the floor, he punched him just above his kidney.

“Yeah, and I’m the Devil himself. Welcome to my fiery home. Come with me, both of you. My buddy will want to get a good look at you.”

Robina made an attempt at mentally persuading the guy to tone down his aggressive behavior, but he resisted her. It might’ve helped if the creep had tranquilized himself with a few rum drinks.

Taking out a gun from where he anchored it near his belt buckle, he directed them to the door. After banging on it with his gun, it was opened by a stoop-shouldered guy with slitted eyes and a sardonic grin. His hair was cut so short, he appeared to be almost bald. Naked to the waist, dark skinned and muscular, he spoke in a raspy voice, a sign of dust-filled lungs. Two kerosene lamps hung overhead and lit up the twenty by ten foot room. At the far end of it, three half-naked Latinos sat on the rock floor with their hands behind their backs.

“What’ve you got there, Dario?” the sweat-streaked hunchback asked.

“I don’t know, Rubin, but we better find out or Gunther will have our heads.”

Dario grabbed Elejandro and smashed him in the stomach with his knee. Striding over to Robina, he grabbed her arm and shoved her against the rock wall. With one hand around her neck, the other swung out and clawed her crotch. His hand lingered there. “A woman! She’s a woman, Rubin. I knew it! I knew it!”

Robina felt obscenely naked. Her primal senses throbbed under her skin.

Once again, projecting a pleasant state of mind into Dario's head proved fruitless. Unable to concentrate as hard as she wished because of the manhandling, all she could do was breath tidally and draw all her resources together.

When Dario punched her in the diaphragm, she let out a yelp of pain. With her breath knocked out of her, she couldn't do anything but try to get some air back into her body. Moments later, with her strategy hidden from Dario, she massed her fingers together straight as a shaft. Placing them in line with his carotid artery, she struck out hard and fast. Stunned, he fell backwards against a wall, then slowly slid to the floor.

Robina pointed and yelled when Rubin crept up behind Elejandro.

Swinging around, Elejandro knocked the gun out of his hand and smashed him against the rock wall. Blood gushed from the guy's head, and before he could retaliate, Elejandro cupped his hands together and made a club. Using the strength of his hips and the upward swing of his shoulders, he smashed him under the chin.

The guy slumped to the floor cursing in Spanish. "When we tell Gunther about you guys, you're both dead meat."

As Elejandro reached for the gun Rubin had dropped on the floor, the room rocked and rattled for fifteen seconds or so before one of the walls collapsed. Rushing over to the prisoners, Robina, finally able to reach the Boy Scout knife in her back pocket, used it to free their hands and feet. They jabbered animatedly as

they fled the room.

Elejandro coughed over and over again. “Thank God Jerry’s been moved out of this hellhole. Let’s get out of here,” he croaked. “It’s just a mild earthquake, but in a cave where the infrastructure’s ready to collapse...”

Staggering drunkenly, Robina jumped over the falling rock that continued to fall in from the side wall—it proved to be a false wall—and she caught sight of a large selection of gold vases and bowls in the hidden room. Barely a few feet away from the dismal jail, she heard the roar of more collapsing rock, and filthy gushes of caustic dust boiled at her back. The reverberations from the blast under her feet set her teeth to chattering.

As she followed Elejandro down the tunnel to the crawl space, a large rock smashed her helmet and sent her reeling. The whirling sand particles and the sweat pouring down her forehead forced her to stop and wipe her eyes with her T-shirt. Wondering if she’d ever see daylight again, she forced back thoughts about dying in the subterranean hell.

Groping her way along the four and a half foot high tunnel in a hunchback position, trying hard not to breathe—*enough to gag a maggot off a gut wagon*—dozens of workers converged and pushed in around her. By the time she reached the slippery mud-covered wooden ramp leading up to the top tunnel, the lack of oxygen made everyone gasp for air. At the same time, she marveled at their lack of

hysteria. In this version of hell in a world gone mad, they were obviously accustomed to the insanity. A mild earthquake didn't happen every day, but, for one reason or another, she knew they'd experienced the escape drill many times in the past.

Weighed down by the thick mud clinging to her Wellies, she grabbed onto a rock protruding from the rough wall. Finding it was nothing but a chunk of mud, her legs threatened to buckle.

The six foot high top tunnel stretched sixty feet or so, but her chance to breathe a little easier didn't happen. Swallowed up by a growing mass of stumbling and dazed hyperventilating men, she got a taste of psychic "information overload." Removing the Incan treasures was against everything these workers believed in. Coughing incessantly, she pushed up against Elejandro. "I'm picking up on the fierce hatred these men are directing at Gunther and his hoodlums. I keep trying to resist their thoughts, but I don't have the power."

"In a few minutes, you'll be free of their thoughts. And maybe they'll do more than think...we need them to start raising hell."

Once she was out in the fresh air, a tight knot released its hold on her belly, and she gave herself over to the primitive reflex of gulping in air.

With the smoke in the air dissipated somewhat, she knew the gunslingers must've kept hoses on hand for just such emergencies. Seeing two men dressed in

clean long-sleeved shirts and long pants standing by the entrance to the cave, she assessed them as Gunther's bullyboys. Quickly positioning herself behind them, she studied the last group of bedraggled half-naked men scurrying out of the cave.

The dying sunlight still made its way through the canopy, but the mercenaries failed to zero in on her or Elejandro. No surprise, really. Judging from their appearance, they looked no different than most of the workers. If the thugs anticipated the appearance of Dario and Ruben, they waited in vain. Those two creeps were buried under tons of limestone and rock.

"No sign of Jerry," she whispered to Elejandro." A cold ripple swept through her when she saw two half-naked men dragging along a poor wretch with a canvas sack covering his head. Recognizing the boots and laces of one of the prisoners from the underground jail, she couldn't breathe a sigh of relief because the poor Latino had no one coming to his rescue.

Seething with anger, she bristled with indignation. The cave was riddled with more holes than Swiss cheese, and ready to collapse. But she knew in her heart that all of those farmers and hunters would be back tomorrow. Gunther's killers would see to it.



Robina brought her bowl of stew and a few pieces of sweet yellowy-white manioc root over to the bed and sat down.

By the light of the raft's halogen lamp, Elejandro walked over to where a big iron stew pot sat on the warm ashes. "It's a wonder the monkeys haven't come begging. It's sure got me salivating." The stew prepared with onions, garlic and coconut milk coupled with the fish made a mouth watering dish. And a tantalizing smell permeated the surrounding area.

"Don't worry about our neighbors. I'm sure those little rascals will be joining us very soon." Before she left the island, she'd make sure to give Elejandro the stew recipe.

Grasping the large ladle left in the pot, Elejandro stirred the mixture and chanted. After he filled his bowl, he picked up a wooden spoon, walked over to the bed, sat down beside Robina and took his first spoonful. Savoring it for a moment, he turned to Robina. "What a great flavor. This has got to be the most appetizing stew I've ever tasted...what I call real comfort food."

As they ate, they reviewed their ordeal in the cave. But Robina gave only half a mind to their chatter. Her thoughts dwelt on the strength and warmth of the body next to hers. My God, what woman wouldn't be tempted to lose herself in the arms of this scientist? Some of the Latino men on the island were hot, mouth-watering hunks and very photogenic but Elejandro's possessed more than just a hot body.

She'd seen him transform himself into the beauty, power and mystery of a

cat that was viewed as the closest jungle counterpart to man. No less magnificent as an exotic beast, his furriness had her thinking of the Mexican civilization that believed in half man-half jaguar creatures. They were considered gods.

Even today, his animal was seen as a symbol for mastery over all dimensions, and she couldn't help thinking of the beast's killing power. Now, in the aftermath of the killings, her mind was filled with fear of his cat and his carnivorous appetite. With one leap, he'd bitten through the skulls of his prey and delivered a fatal blow to their brains.

From the first time she looked into the smoldering depths of Elejandro's golden feral eyes, a savage inner fire had burst into flames. By listening to her guiding voice, she was well aware their strange relationship would eventually be derailed. But for now, she intended to enjoy all the high drama and the constant danger that kept her on tenterhooks. Because their worlds were so far apart, things would inevitably return to normal, and there'd be no unresolved matters of the heart to worry about.

To just touch him, that's all she wanted to do. What a lie. One touch and she knew there'd be no turning back. She'd surrender to whatever civilized machinations his ingenious mind planned for them. She forgot to breathe. My God, she was besotted. Because the silence hung there after they'd eaten, she took off her muddy boots, lay down on the bed and prepared to play her "non-touching"

sex game.

Before her imagination took off, Elejandro peeled her overalls and panties down over her buttocks, and then lay down beside her, his dense pile of black hair falling against the red lining of the sleeping bag they'd placed over the palm leaves. Pushing his strong resilient body, so hard and unyielding, close to hers, his unshaven face chafed and thrilled as they engaged in some hot French kissing.

Pulling away, he looked down at her flushed face. "I've heard redheaded Scottish women are warriors. Are you a warrior? Are you as brave as a lion and ready to mark and stake your claim on me?"

She didn't know how to respond to that, so she decided not to say anything. Allowing herself to give in to just feeling, she desperately wanted him to absorb her desire and make it his own.

When her mouth opened to suck in some fresh air, he drew her tongue into his mouth and sucked. Soon their tongues were dueling and she sampled the musky, spicy taste of him and the soft and rough textures of his inner folds. His fingers slipped down and began teasing one of her stiff aching nipples, and then it was his mouth's turn to strum, lick and nuzzle.

Robina moaned, gasped and sucked in a breath. The energetic flow of her sensuality affected every nerve ending in her body. Her orgasm came close to a point of no return. *No, no, no the storm mustn't build too quickly.*

Gently pushing him onto his side, she dragged her tongue over every inch of his body and discovered where his chest felt as smooth as a baby's bum and where it displayed a little fuzz. While licking and kissing, she searched out the planes, angles and contours of his shoulder blades, chest and abdomen. Just as she thought about climbing up his body, kneeling over his face and exposing her nether lips for his attention, he took over again. After flipping her onto her stomach, he got up from the bed. "Now just relax."

"What are you up to?"

"I'm going to massage you. There's a jar of lotion in my knapsack. Ah, here it is."

As he worked on her with skillful hands, he paid attention to every pleasure point. When something silky, hard and bouncy squeezed in between her left and right buttocks, the area around them trembled and sparks flew in front of her eyes.

She couldn't deny it, however, as her lover continued to work on separating the two parts making up her rump, and slowly and patiently massaging her virginal anus, she did feel a little uneasy. *Come on, shugah, this ain't your first rodeo.* And you're always ready to experience the thrill of a new kind of ride. Raising herself up on her knees, she thrust her buttocks toward the top of the shelter. Elejandro gasped. "Are you sure about this?"

"Go for it."

Freeing up his other hand, he busily continued to rub the cheeks of her bottom around and around. The sensation caused by his sleek and heavy penis bouncing in the cleft between her cheeks, once again caused her to breathe in soul-drenching drafts of air. Then, after his oil-saturated fingers dipped deeper and deeper into the small tight puckered hole, his thumbs worked on stretching it. As those appendages continued to caress and pull, her nerve endings went crazy.

Resting on her elbows, Robina, feeling deliciously decadent, leaned back into Elejandro's body and offered him her rocking, wriggling butt. She thought of how this particular sexual position came closest to the way the ancient Celts performed their lusty connections. Her Scottish ancestors most likely participated in a custom involving a sex ritual or two. Besides, no way would she miss out on an opportunity to enjoy a new experience with the sexy jungle doctor.

When Elejandro began to inch himself into her, it felt rather pleasant. When he suddenly rammed into her, however, she let out a howl. Over and over again, at full throttle, he pushed inward, higher and higher. Then slowing the rhythm of his throbbing charging force, he began to create excruciatingly shimmering sensations. Giving herself over to him with total trust and abandon, she soon reached a peak of exquisite pleasure that produced several howls, much like a wolf in a freezing wilderness.

Holding onto her hips, Elejandro pulled her close. "Oh God, did I hurt you?"

he whispered.

“Not that I noticed. But you did catch me by surprise.” To be perfectly honest, she found his rear-end attack surprisingly pleasurable although she did ache and sting a little.

Reaching around to the front of her cleft, he stroked the tight hard bud that ached to be touched. His soft lips sucked on her neck in a pretense of branding and claiming her. Liquid fire tore through her body and aroused every corner of her being—even parts never known to experience episodes of pure bliss. Feeling incredibly wanton, she wondered if all shifters were so incredibly irresistible.

Gasping, stiffening and grunting, Elejandro drove into her. At first, he moved with a steady beat. Then his movements became more hurried, and the heat and friction increased. After he exploded in a powerful climax, she found herself calling out his name as a sweet undulating current of release washed over her.

Chapter Eight

Stopping in a forest clearing later that night Elejandro, already in tune with his jaguar's larger responsiveness to life, quickly unleashed the beast's inherent qualities. Removing his clothes, he wrapped them around his flashlight and placed them under a pile of bamboo stakes. In the shadows of the jungle, blending in with its shady surroundings, the cat merged with the rainforest as a spectral vapor prowling unseen between tree limbs and meandering vines.

Snaking through the corridors of his mind, the voices of the tall, cutting blades of grass, the warm rustling of the palm leaves and the anaconda hanging from the Brazil nut tree were just as real to the beast as the beating of his heart and the rushing of his blood.

With potent forces of nature at his beck and call, he reigned all-powerful, all-seeing. His silent prowess, climbing agility, swiftness and decisiveness were some of the factors contributing to his success in the rainforest. He navigated through the deep trenches by his senses alone. Spiky grasses and thorns snagged at his paws, and bamboo shoots tried to slow him down. Overgrown and intertwined thick vines without roots in the soil, spread from one tree crotch to another and

tried to entrap him. But the cat experienced no problem charging over, under and through them without getting entangled.

Even when a tegu lizard, red howler monkey and a squeaking tamarin, that looked like a small monkey with a lion's mane, scurried out of their hideouts, he left them alone. As a stalk and ambush predator, however, if he were hungry when he met a wandering steer, tapir or deer, they might be on the menu. The jaguar, from his prey's blind spot, would come at them with a quick pounce. Not to happen on this scouting expedition.

The cat slowed down to a stealthy crawl when he smelled smoke. On catching sight of a shack about twelve feet in front of him, he saw a stocky figure about average height leaning against a tree, his rifle clearly profiled. Detouring to avoid being seen, the animal made his way to the front of the structure.

The dying fire inside, meant to keep the mosquitoes at bay, needed to get a lot hotter for the smoke to continue rising through the smoke hole. Four hammocks were strung to the poles holding up the tarp-covered roof. Rifles were seen on the floor beside each of the three hammocks in use. Miners didn't carry guns, so these guys were Gunther's men.

Letting out a few snarls and grunts, the jaguar growled and hid well back in a thick collection of brush, wild cane and ferns.

The men were not asleep. Jumping out of their hammocks, they grabbed

their guns and searched the outside surroundings with their binoculars, headlamps and flashlights. Gathering in front of their shelter, they cursed and vented their frustration.

“I thought it was a jaguar,” said the guy on lookout duty. “But it could’ve been one of those crazy monkeys.”

“Goddamn it, Paulo,” said a tall, lean guy with a jagged scar running down half his face, “I thought you knew the difference between a jaguar’s roar and a monkey’s call.”

Paulo groaned. “Like you’d know, wouldn’t you, Carlos?”

The short thug with the long scraggly beard let out a loud groan. “Jaguars don’t roar, howler monkeys do.”

“Oh, shut up, Doug,” Paulo said, “You’re such a goddamn know-it-all.”

“I can’t go back to sleep now. What if it really is a jaguar?” the fourth mercenary, his heavy built frame clearly outlined, spoke in a high-pitched voice. “When Gunther heard about a black jaguar checking out his headquarters, he went ape-shit.”

“Come on, Hank,” Doug said, “What’s he afraid of? Jaguars don’t kill people. No bodies have been found. So our two guys were probably killed by Ramiro’s boys.”

Carlos, a skeletally thin guy, walked over to a spot not far from the cat.

Flinty eyed and expressionless, he stared into the bushes as he relieved himself. “Well, I don’t trust those jaguars. If they’re hungry, they’ll eat you. They stake out a huge area, at least forty square miles according to Jerry, the monkey man. So the black jaguar roaming around Luizao probably patrols this land right here.”

The jaguar longed to sink his teeth into Carlos’s bone, flesh and muscle and taste the warmth of nourishing blood. Tension came into his frame as his feral eyes zeroed in on the men. He recognized the scent of the two humans he’d killed on the trail to the Zoala cave. The killers who shot the golden jaguar must’ve shared their blankets with these guys.

The cat’s nostrils flared, and in his large receptiveness to life, layers of smell moved through his body. Like emotions, they varied in degree. Thankfully, restraint and willpower won out. With Elejandro’s input, the cat canceled the urge to make a lethal pounce and rip them apart with his razor-sharp fangs.

No animal understood the power of silence like the jaguar. Stalking silently, remaining isolated and patiently waiting for the right moment were qualities a jaguar owned in spades. Frozen to the spot, he became entirely quiet.

Back in his hammock, Carlos, his skinny body tangled in mosquito netting, tried to get comfortable, but didn’t appear to have much luck. Following a spell of coughing, he let out a string of expletives. “This place is filling up with smoke. For God’s sake will someone throw more wood on the fire?”

Hank, the stout guy, struggled out of his hammock and threw some wood on the burning coals. “It’s a good thing Edwardo got Jerry out of the jail in the Zoala cave. After that crappy wall came down, there was a massive cave-in. So there’ll be no more mining for Incan gold. Anyway...from what I’ve heard, Monkey Man’s out at the airport now, so Gunther’s ready to take off any day now.”

The cat got a glimpse of Paulo lighting up a cigarette as he stood outside the netting that made up the door. “I wonder what they did with his monkey. It drove Gunther nuts. Maybe the little bugger’s dead. And, if Jerry doesn’t make himself useful, and soon, he’s dead, too.”

Carlos moaned. “There are a dozen men out at the airport so something big’s going down...and we’ll be told to get out there, too. So let’s get some sleep.”



Heading back to the raft, Elejandro thought of his cat’s restraint tonight. On the most intense plane, his animal held back on terrifying those thugs. If he’d used his dark energy to tear inside the bodies of those ruthless men and deadened their every muscle, nerve, vein and blood vessel, Gunther might lay low in the yacht or immediately take off in his chopper. His fear of jaguars appeared to be his Achilles’ heel.

To permanently remove the thieving brute from the rainforest, he must be caught off guard, out in the open and soon. His greedy energy quickly consumed a

peaceful way of life that had worked amazingly well for nearly five hundred years.

At first, when Gunther arrived a year ago, the Latinos must've been unmindful of how quickly they'd become slaves to him. But they knew now, and they wanted the ruthless greedy brute off the island.

Just as Elejandro emerged in human form, his shape-shift completely reversed, a female jaguar, off in the distance, sent out a series of hooting calls and announced she was ready, willing and able to copulate.

His inner beast stirred restlessly. A powerful force, he flexed his claws in his eagerness to break free. The heat inside him threatened to grow ever stronger, but he managed to tamp it down before the animal made a partial change to his body. He wanted no fangs or hairy face spoiling what he planned to do when he reached Robina.

Their spirited lovemaking, after dinner yesterday, came not long after his transformation from jaguar back to human. Just a kiss and he'd been, immediately caught up in her intimate absorption. He'd lusted for her in a tidal wave of wild rapture, intense and undeniable. And now, twelve hours later, a primal need to possess the intriguing redhead poured through him like a spill of hot energy.

When he reached the raft, he removed his clothes and climbed into the raised bed. Robina slept so soundly, he decided to wait till morning. It nearly killed him, but she needed energy for tomorrow's trip to the makeshift airport. At

dawn, Elejandro awakened from his deep sleep and looked over at Robina. Almost immediately, he found his jaguar's year-long ability to mate still rousing his innate sexuality. With the same intensity he used for hunting, the cat moved restlessly. Unable to pull back from the powerful force of his emotions, he slipped out of bed, left the raft and hiked over to the small creek he'd seen earlier.

Wading into the middle of the creek, he sat down in the warm water. Finding the sandy bottom surprisingly comfortable, he lay his head down on a moss-covered rock and stretched out. He desperately needed time for seclusion, a few moments of quiet isolation. Completely detached from all thoughts of deceit, deception and murder, he absorbed the sounds and smells of his surroundings. Suspended in time, he drifted off.



Awakened when Elejandro crawled out of bed, Robina waited a few minutes before she followed him. Hanging well back because she didn't want him to pick up her scent. With his psyche at its most open and vulnerable, she recalled the power with which he'd pushed his body into hers. His blood had run hot, hot, hot and transferred itself to her in a rush of liquid heat.

Reaching the creek, she waited until Elejandro immersed himself in the clear water. Once again, she gave thought to the animal sharing his body. If Elejandro transformed himself into his jaguar right now, and his skin exuded the

musky smell of the great cat, would she delight in rubbing herself against his soft plush coat? Could she, in a relaxed and playful mood, pet and play with him without fear of the beast overstepping?

Looking around, she took in the beauty around the remote untouched waterway where sandbanks shimmered in the sun and high forests closed in on both sides. Picking up on the savage beat and harmony of her surroundings, she sat down in the red soil and leaned against a large black rock. Elejandro obviously meant to give himself a thorough soaking. The cat he carried around inside him loved the water.

Lazily collapsing onto the grassy beach, she drifted in between waking and sleeping. Hearing a rough cough, she warily sat up and looked around.

Shit fire and save matches! She let out a quick sharp breath when a female jaguar, with golden fur and stunning black rosettes, emerged from the jungle. The cat stood motionless for a few moments before she approached the creek. Paddling out into the water, she began to splash around, and generally appeared to have a rollicking good time. Coming out of the water, she shook herself and stretched out on the beach.

Robina's heart banged against her ribs as she crept over to the beast. Barely able to breathe from excitement when the cat lay only a few feet away from her—no doubt in her mind about the cat picking up her scent—she experienced an

adrenaline rush that left her breathless. Heartstoppingly close to a wild, two hundred pound unpredictable animal—the kind capable of killing with one blow—and she felt calm. Calm! Unbelievable!

The sweat poured off her as the pulse at the side of the jaguar's throat, her flaring nostrils and her whiskered muzzle held her in awed fascination. The cat's slitted glittering yellow eyes pulled her in and, as her warm feline breath filled her nostrils, she experienced an amazing, surreal experience. It was as if the beast had bonded with her in some way.

Then the beautiful animal languidly made her way to the river. Elejandro looked over at her, but as her swim took her farther and farther away from him, he closed his eyes again. Shortly after, the beast returned and frolicked in the water; Robina was sure the cat would welcome her if she joined her.

Walking down to the water's edge, she waded in a few feet, and began to splash water on the beast. When the jaguar gave herself a few vigorous shakes and splattered water all over her, Robina was almost sure she must be the jaguar that Veronica had told her about. Brought up by a man, she didn't fear her presence. So the cat killed by Gunther's men was another female jaguar.

Shortly after, when the cat waded out of the water, Robina followed. The jaguar's golden eyes held her gaze when she sat down a few feet away from her. Then, to her astonishment, she felt herself floating across the space between them

and merging with the beast. Thunderstruck, the essence of the cat, the smell of her and the strength in her shoulders almost overpowered her.

Just as quickly, the cat broke the spell by letting out a grunt, and Robina sensed the beast's unease. She had to end her out-of-body trip. Concentrating hard on pulling herself away from the jaguar's magnetic hold, she returned to her own body.

With her astral spirit back in her body, Robina sat up and watched the jaguar lick her paws and preen herself. Following that, the cat made a few deep grunts and slipped back into the rainforest.

Brushing aside a centipede as big as her finger, Robina relished the huge step she'd taken. Trusting the female jaguar brought her that much closer to accepting her own feline spirit. So, surely, she could now accept Elejandro's jaguar as an unthreatening part of him.

Moments later, when she slumped down onto the sand and sprawled out with her arms above her head, Elejandro knelt between her legs. Sitting up, she threw her arms around him. "I'm sure that jaguar was the one that escaped from the caged-in area. Like I told you, some guy brought the jaguar home when she was only a baby. So I'm sure that's why she didn't bite my head off. She's not afraid of humans.

"Wasn't she fantastic? She trusted me. Jaguars are usually secretive...so wary

of humans. Can you believe it? I was in astral form, inside her body. The sensation was unbelievable...we traded spirits! I know I'm rattling on like some crazy person, but it was such a thrilling experience. From now on, the jaguar walks with me. She's here in my heart forever." Robina placed a hand over her heart and tried to read Elejandro's reaction.

"While your body took on its astral form, your physical body lay defenseless. That jaguar could've moved in and killed you. Jaguars often hypnotize their prey before they pounce on them. So you took a terrible risk."

"I knew you were watching over me."



"I watched you all right. Time stopped. I'll never forget what I saw." Elejandro swallowed and tried to tamp down the emotion that forced him to deal with all their shared past intimacies in one fell swoop. Settling his body into the grass and windblown leaves, he knew her experience with the beautiful feline was enough for her to process right now. So spiring her off into a shape shift where they too would merge, body and soul, must be put off for a later time.

When her radiant green eyes met his, he marveled at how the dappled sunlight gave them a wild feral aspect. The heavy exotic essence of the female jaguar's over-heated body and scorching breath still clung to her body. Without deodorants or perfumes clogging up his sense of smell, he picked up her singular

scent: a mix of chocolate, vanilla, coffee and a touch of jaguar.

As she explored different aspects of her power animal, she'd experience more and more energy exchanges. By listening with heart and mind she'd also find an improvement in her telepathic power, even an ability to communicate with her alternate spirit.

A mystical, otherworldly and somehow familiar response, that came with its own kind of strength and stamina, crawled its way through his body. Driven by a fierce compulsion to have her mystical aura completely under his spell, he reached out with his mind. With his whole being involved, he recalled the sight of Robina splashing water on the jaguar. The image heated his insides and her essence became his only source of oxygen.

And, in his heart, he knew his extraordinary reaction to her new-found source of protective and emotional support indicated his love for her. It was a reality. He never wanted their time together to come to an end.



As Robina got her stuff together for the trip to the airport, she thought about the way Elejandro had first described his job. He'd called himself an herbalist who crushed, brewed and distilled herbs in order to heal people. But, right from the beginning, she suspected he delved into some deeper, darker stuff than working with mortar and pestle. And it proved to be no wild-ass guess on her

part.

Elejandro's ability to perform radical shifts in consciousness two nights in a row revealed incredible amounts of discipline and human energy on demand. The contortions his body went through in order for a jaguar to emerge from his body made her feel as if she'd roamed into an alternative universe. And to know he connected with his jaguar's thought processes. Unbelievable!

A kind of reprogramming took over her brain after awakening from her coma, and since then, she often felt as though she operated outside of time. During the last few days, she felt more and more empowered by her life-changing experiences in the company of the sleek and wiry all-seeing botanist. According to him, she embodied the spirit of a feline when it came to patience, beauty, gracefulness and landing on her feet. While she'd been in a coma, he believed she'd undergone an episode of mystical death—almost dying, but not quite—in order to experience a radical transformation into a superhuman condition.

Her astral shift into a female jaguar's body was certainly proof that she was closer to recognizing the animal within.

Walking over and lifting the mosquito netting, she waited until Elejandro slipped outside. Capturing his eye, she gave him a look of intense inquisitiveness. "Early this morning, when you came to bed, I caught the whiff of the jaguar. There's no mistaking it...so pungent and wild."

“To me, my jaguar is like a thick black velvet shadow igniting me with energy and power. He’s a frisky gentleman completely under my control. I hope you get to know him.”

As they hiked along the two mile trail that led to the outskirts of Luizao, Elejandro’s golden eyes lit up and his smile and the lines at the corners of his eyes were on full display. “Like you suspected, I shifted into my jaguar after you were asleep. And I finally got my cat’s killer instinct under control. Ruthless men, who carried the smell of the jaguar killers, and a female jaguar crying out for a mate...neither roused my jaguar’s killer instinct nor his sexual urges. So please don’t fear my alternate body. You can trust us.”

Elejandro’s eyes sparkled with an inner glow. “My grandmother told me to ‘bring the jaguar down from the tree’—in other words face my fear. ‘Find a soul mate’, she’d suggested, ‘release yourself into your lover and experience the highest spiritual union ever.’

“And I’ve accomplished that”—he stepped behind Robina and threw his arms around her waist—“I’m buoyed up with the kind of love I never thought possible. My jaguar chose you, too, so he no longer challenges my will.”

Well cover me with eggs and flour and bake me for forty minutes. He’d shared his granny’s wise words. Like an ancient Scottish love spell, she’d make them hers, too—they’d become the life force of her universe. Taking ownership of her own

fears, eating them up and swallowing them down was long overdue.

An hour and a half later, the picture of a plane sketched on a slab of wood, caught Robina's attention. "There's the sign I told you about. It's a mile hike to the airport."

As she walked down the rough road beside Elejandro, she thought of him working in two worlds: finding plants to cure human conditions and using his spirit animal for righting wrongs. Ordinary reality and multi-dimensional awareness.

He'd awakened a wild sexual energy in her, and the intensity of his scent, kiss and feel kept her in a state where the unexpected could happen at any moment. So, while they worked together, she planned on staying close and sharing their special friendship with benefits.

Chapter Nine

Elejandro looked up when he heard a plane off in the distance. “If that giant chopper is still out at the airport, Jerry’s in it. Last night, those creeps mentioned that Gunther planned to take off any day now.” When they were within sight of the runway, he watched as the plane closed in on the airport. But with far too much air speed and not even full flaps to slow the approach, a safe landing was impossible. Heading for the wrong end of the field, the plane lost a wheel in one of the potholes, overran the runway, and crashed into the jungle.

As Gunther’s men maneuvered two forklifts through the mud and grass toward the wreck, Elejandro wondered what kind of contraband it carried. Mercury? Liquor? Guns?

The pilot made it out of the plane and struggled over to one of the forklift drivers who quickly tied a length of cable around the rear end of the fuselage. Following what appeared to be a heated argument, the airman watched as a forklift driver pulled his plane out of an understory made up of small trees, shrubs and plants. And, as soon as it sat on solid ground, Gunther’s men helped the pilot unload it.

Robina joined Elejandro and hid in the underbrush. A short while later, there was a blast and the plane was blown to smithereens. As a plume of black smoke made its way toward the rain-filled clouds blocking the sun high overhead, Elejandro cursed the darkness of the evil man who acted as though he were above the law.

Robina nodded toward the burning plane. “Looks like they’re getting ready to clean up the debris. So let’s check out the hangar.”

Once inside a small office, Elejandro scurried around to a desk chair on the other side of the rough plank desk. “Gunther’s men don’t keep a ledger, but I found a scribbled note.” Turning to Robina, he waved some papers in the air. “It says Gunther’s taking off in his chopper the day after tomorrow. But I can’t find anything about his destination, or what he’ll be transporting.”

Seconds later, the sound of a small aircraft reached their ears. They turned and watched as a Cessna stopped in front of the hanger.

“Quick,” Elejandro said, grabbing a rusted propeller from a workbench. “Let’s use the side door and hide in the jungle until we find out if Gunther’s chopper’s out back.”

Elejandro stuffed some papers inside his shirt and followed Robina out the door and along the periphery of the jungle. From a crouched position behind a burned out corpse of a plane, he looked down the field behind the hangar. “That

huge black chopper must be Gunther's. The name 'Libre' on the fuselage...what a misnomer."

"Are you sure Jerry's in that chopper?"

As Elejandro inhaled a lungful of moist warm air, he thought of the secrets and lies men like Gunther and his gunslingers lived on. "I sure hope those goons told the truth. But double-crossing each other must be pretty common. Now I go first, sweetie. And don't argue with me. I'll be fine."

"Be careful, some of those gunmen are bound to be watching over that chopper."

Elejandro's stomach clenched and his pulse raced when he saw a man emerge from behind some trees near the edge of the jungle. A heavy-set creature, with the features of a predatory raptor, flew toward Elejandro and knocked the propeller out of his hand with his gun. His hawk-like eyes darted from Elejandro to the spot in the jungle where Robina hid.

"What the hell are you up to?" he roared menacingly. "Are you in cahoots with those damn shit disturbers?"

Elejandro folded his arms. "Goddamn it, Gunther blew up my plane and now I'm left without a job."

Hawk-face laughed, put his gun in his holster and picked up the piece of propeller on the ground. "What're you trying to do with this? Put one of those

wrecked planes back together again?”

“Ha, ha. Come on, now. Give me a chance to talk to Gunther. I need a job. I can’t get off this island without some cash.”

The guy’s face took on the look of pure malice. “Get the hell out of here, asshole. My orders are to shoot anyone who comes near the air field.”

“All I want—”

The menacing creep came at Elejandro in a headlong rush, and hit him on the back with the propeller. “If you don’t get out of here, you’re a dead man.”

Thankfully, hawk-face quickly lost interest in Elejandro. He focused on the three forklifts piled high with the newly arrived crates making their way to Gunther’s chopper.

When Elejandro crept out of a thick section of brush and stepped into the tangled clearing where Robina hid, he grinned broadly. “That bastard didn’t find me much of a threat. But he’s definitely expecting trouble. From the guys working in the Zoala cave? From the miners digging for gold in the Luizao mud hole? Who knows? But take it from me, he’s nervous as hell. There’s something very strange going down around here.”

“It’s time for us to get back to the raft and plan how we’re going to get inside that chopper. No use waiting around for those guys to get lost. They’ve got a lot of hauling and cleanup to do.”



Coming out of a deep sleep, Robina quickly became aware of Elejandro's warm breath brushing her neck as he nipped her earlobes and ran open-mouth kisses along her jaw. After raining more light kisses on her mouth, he began to gently and leisurely suck and bite her lower lip.

Fully awake, she pulled away, removed her tank top, and pushed her sweat pants down to her ankles. When he rubbed his chest against her breasts, her nipples grew hard, and she held back an urge to call out like a female jaguar. A short rapid cough known as sawing, announced the cat was ready to mate. And boy was she in the mood! Shivers ran through her body as she ran her nails over his back and scratched him ever so lightly as she sucked in the animal scented air, the hiss and the hum of it.

Expanded by sheer pleasure, an image of the jaguar's fangs surfaced in all their frightening intensity. But, if Elejandro bit into her skin, it wouldn't be to draw blood. It would be his way of marking her as his own. His alter-ego was a jaguar, not a vampire. And, like a jaguar, his human body used unique scents and body secretions to stake his claim. Not to declare his right to a vast amount of land, but to show his entitlement to a place in her heart.

As one of Elejandro's warm hands found its way down her ribs and belly, his lips followed and covered her in wet kisses. On the prowl, picking up her unique

exotic scent, he closed in on her feminine core.

Pushing her legs wide apart, he slid down under the blankets. With his head between her legs, he cupped her mound and then buried his mouth in her. Sucking on her outer and inner labia, he performed a dance with his lips and tongue. By the time two fingers were thrust into her channel, a thick honeyed sludge of pleasure oozed from belly to thigh.

Gasping, on the razor's edge, her body blazed out-of-control. It burned away at her nipples and deep down inside her. Her hips began to jerk raggedly when his lips took over and began to torture, pull and suck on her clitoris. Craving a need for release, holding back was no longer an option. Climaxing in an almost berserk fury, each shallow breath came out sounding like a sob. For a brief moment in time, she was released into Elejandro, and he into her. Inexhaustible, he'd succeeded in bringing every romantic flight of fancy she'd ever imagined to fruition.

The mingling rich, musky scent of Elejandro's semen and her secretions overwhelmed her. From beneath her modern exterior, primeval senses long buried inside her body's dark nooks and crannies switched on. Handed down from her Scottish ancestors, they'd waited to emerge whenever she took time to acknowledge them.

Empowered by Elejandro's powerful essence swirling around her, she

uncoiled like a snake. At the root of their emotional connection was the promise of growth. More than just an irresistible attraction or luscious juicy lust, their passion lifted her spirit and she knew in her heart, from this time on, her life would never be the same.



Hiding in the brush on the periphery of the makeshift airport the next morning, Elejandro pulled Robina down beside him. “The guards are in the hangar. Let’s go. This may be our only chance.”

Reaching the chopper, Elejandro scrambled up the retractable steps, opened the passenger door and motioned Robina inside. Leading her into a large cargo area, he looked around. “This chopper’s made for carrying heavy loads. If it weren’t for all these crates, the main body of this giant could probably hold up to forty people.”

Robina picked up a nearby crow bar and opened one of the crates. She shook her head. “Nothing but flattened cardboard boxes in here.”

Elejandro grabbed a hammer. Ripping up a slat, he peered into the crate. “Nothing but padded nets for catching birds and monkeys. Stuff for zoo keepers. I don’t think we should waste time checking all of them. Jerry’s not in here.

“Now think, this is a monstrous aircraft. Do you notice anything different about it? Anything odd? Something different about the interior besides the large

amount of cargo space?”

Robina nodded toward the cockpit. “Some of the seats were knocked down to make more room, and a couple of them were replaced with a storage bench.”

Elejandro rushed up to the front of the bench and knelt down on the floor. “What the hell? The damn thing’s padlocked.” Using his machete, he smashed the lock and lifted the padded slab of wood. There tucked inside the bench was Jerry. Mouth secured with duct tape as well as his wrists and ankles. “My God, Jerry!” He quickly removed the duct tape from Jerry’s mouth.

Jerry’s bloodshot blue eyes, wide open with relief, quickly filled with tears. “Elejandro! Elejandro! I knew you’d try to find me.” With effort, he managed to sit up. “Help me out of this damn tomb. They put me in here last night, but it feels like I’ve been in here for an eternity. Thank God some oxygen found its way through the slats.”

“What kind of a sick twisted son-of-a-bitch are we dealing with here?” Elejandro found it hard to tamp down his rising fury as he removed the tape from Jerry’s hands and ankles. “When were you last fed?”

Standing on shaky feet, Jerry tucked his shirt inside his pants, slammed down the cover and sat down.

“What time is it?”

“One in the afternoon.”

“Then I’ve had no food or water for nearly eighteen hours. I haven’t soiled myself yet. I guess my body’s quit working.”

Robina came over and handed him a bottle of water. “It’s great to finally meet you. My plane crashed near Elejandro’s herbal hut, so we teamed up for this rescue mission.”

“You’ve risked your life coming to this side of the island. Gunther’s turned this place into a slave camp.” He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Now let’s get out of this flying beast. But be careful. There are two security guards keeping an eye on me. And I have no idea where the pilots go when they’re off duty.”

Robina opened the passenger door and helped Jerry down the steps. Elejandro threw the duct tape inside the seat, and put the screws back into the side of the bench so the lock appeared to be untouched. Dashing out of the chopper, he ran over to the back of the hangar and grabbed a couple of four gallon containers filled with diesel fuel. He’d probably need it when he got his yacht back.

When they were all well hidden in the forest, Jerry gave Elejandro a questioning look. “Where do we go from here?”

“We’ve got to get the yacht back. But first, Gunther has to be stopped. If we can’t do that, things don’t look too good for us.”

Jerry put his arm around his shoulder. “I’ll help you guys any way I can. The

bastard's an animal trafficker. He planned to force me into treating the sick and traumatized animals until they reach his contacts abroad. He's well supplied with drugs and medication for the animals...but he desperately needs a veterinarian."

Elejandro shook his head and Jerry mimicked the movement. "Tomorrow, they're going to truck all the crates in the back of the chopper over to the warehouse—most of the medicines, too. And the next day, they're going to fill the chopper full of rare and endangered wildlife and fly them overseas. The bastard has to be stopped before he takes off."

Robina adjusted her backpack. "We need more help then. The people we should be talking to are the group of villagers who are messing with Gunther's warehouses and shooting tranquilizing darts into his gang members. Let's get into town and scout around for some disgruntled Hispanics."

As they trod down the trail, Elejandro assessed Jerry's condition from his position in the rear. His gait was unsteady, but a life of tromping through the country in search of sick rare and exotic animals had kept him in good shape. Tall, lean and wiry, once he got a chance to recoup some of his energy, he'd be as strong as he'd ever been. "How about giving us a rundown on what happened to you?"

Jerry shuddered and gave him a look of abject despair. "Gunther thought he could scare me into working for him. But I just kept telling him to go to hell.

"Anyway, because some of the villagers organized themselves and are

fighting back, his men kept a close eye on me. Scared I'd join up with the rebels, I guess. For about a week, I stayed on the yacht. Then I spent a day in the big barn called the boss's headquarters.

“Next, I found myself on my way to the Zoala cave, and I spent a day in the jail they built deep down in the bowels of that crumbling mess of trenches and bat-filled tunnels. They took my monkey, Mancu, and I miss her like the very devil. After they dragged me out of the cave, I was entombed in the chopper.”

Robina grabbed Jerry's arm. “Hold on there, Jerry. Keep your head down, and don't talk to anyone. And when we reach the outskirts of town, hide in the jungle until we come to get you. I'll bring you some food.”

When they reached town, after Elejandro bought a backpack, sleeping bag, Wellies, and poncho for Jerry, he led Robina to the café that didn't have caged animals on display. While they drank papaya juice and waited for their order—cornmeal patties smothered in cheese—a young Hispanic man wearing a plastic poncho, came up to Elejandro. Smiling broadly, he grabbed his hand. “My name is Chico. About three years ago, you visited this village when everything was peaceful. And while you were here, my brother, Ramiro got real sick with malaria. He heard you were a plant doctor, so he went to you for help. And you made him better. I know who you are because Ramiro took a picture of you.”

Elejandro slid out of his seat. “I remember Ramiro. I've heard he's the one

who's organizing a team to overthrow Gunther's gang of thieves. And I'd like to help him."

Chico looked around the room. "Ramiro's not far from here." He spoke in a hushed whisper. "I'll take you to him if you like."

Elejandro eyed Robina. "Wait here for me. This is just what I've been hoping for." As he made his way through the marketplace, he lifted the hood of his plastic poncho over his cap. No one seemed to notice them as they walked into a stall where women wove baskets out of bark and waterproofed them with the sap from trees. They walked out the back of the stall and into the jungle. They'd gone about ninety or so feet into the giant wet foliage, when Elejandro saw three men sitting on a log. Light filtered down from the canopy and cast mottled shadows on them. "Ramiro...it's so good to see you."

Ramiro jumped up and came over to him. "Elejandro! Are you here to help us? This guy Gunther has ruined our way of life. We must get our village back before it's wiped out. You know we have no use for gold. We're traders." As he paused to catch his breath, he regarded Elejandro with searching gravity.

"Yeah, I'll help you any way I can."

Ramiro embraced him. "Que bien! Que bien! My ancient ancestors never thought the sacred Zoala cave would ever be reopened. It was a death trap when the Incas hid their golden treasures in there, and now it's history, nothing but

rubble. And Gunther's men kill anyone who doesn't work in that monstrous open mine pit. And no one's brought to justice." Ramiro stood about five feet ten, and his head, a little out of proportion with his body, was rather large. Maybe his thick, black hair, piled high on his head, was meant to make him look taller, but it just made his head appear even larger. Dressed in a dark shirt and pants like the other two, his face was coffee-colored, leathery and wrinkled. As he turned sideways to make his way out of the tangle of roots, Elejandro saw a long tube filled with thin curare-dipped darts held in place across his back with ropes.

"Que pena! Que pena!" Ramiro gasped, "And those fiends have Jerry as a prisoner. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Jerry's free of those thugs now. We found him in Gunther's chopper."

"Bien! Bien! Great news. Smuggling animals, that's what he's doing now. He's got a warehouse about a dozen miles from the airport. It's full of animals and birds. They're terribly mistreated and many of them are sick. And Gunther will be stuffing more monkeys and parrots into his chopper any day now. Smuggling animals makes him very rich. He's stealing our wildlife." He breathed in shallow, quick gasps, and uncertainty crept into his expression. "In order to save those animals—I can't seem to come up with a plan. The problem is overwhelming."

"If my friends and I try to help those animals in the warehouse, can we count on your group to come on board?"

Ramiro nodded his head vigorously. “Sure can. Those bastards cut down trees in order to make a landing field. So we plan to throw the trees they’ve left behind onto the runway. It won’t stop the chopper from taking off, but no more planes will be able to land.”

“On the way into Luizao, I searched for a place to hide my raft. And right after I reached a large waterfall, I entered a narrow stream off to the right that ended at the site of a huge Banyan tree. At that point a dam stops the flow of water. It can’t be too far from the airfield because I saw a plane come in for a landing.”

“We dug that waterway for a purpose. The Banyan tree, with all its roots and branches, is the one we use to punish our people for doing wrong. We tie them up and leave them where the tangled vines make basket-like nooks. They have plenty of food and water, but the bugs have their way with them. By the end of two weeks, the Mother Tree’s embrace is usually enough time for them to realize how crazy they’ve been acting.”

Elejandro smiled inwardly. To have Gunther tied up in a tree where the insects and animals would mete out their justice, appealed to him on many levels. “Great idea. But how on earth did your men carve out a river and build a dam without excavating machinery?”

“During the dry season, we used our machetes to scrape out a channel from

the waterfall to the sacred tree. Canoes work real good in there.”

“Can your men dig out another channel on the other side of the dam—one that leads to the airfield? And then find explosives and blow up the dam? If you can flood the runway, it would serve as a diversion while we break into the animal warehouse tomorrow night.”

“Vale! Vale! Okay, okay. That’ll work because of the thirty-foot slope down to the airport.” He nodded at Chico and looked back at the two men who remained seated. “These men will quickly round up the rest of my followers. And if the waterway has to be done that quickly, twelve of my guys will grab some shovels from the mine site right away. They should have no trouble digging a channel by tomorrow night.”

“And that’ll give Robina, Jerry and me time to plan our strategy.”

“Robina?”

“Yeah. Her plane crashed near my compound. She’s worked with animals and she’s managed to do some great undercover work during the past few days.”

“Will this be a surprise attack?”

“I’m not sure. But once Gunther realizes Jerry’s escaped, he’s bound to put his men on full alert at the warehouse and airport.”

“Now, at exactly what time do you plan to rescue the animals?”

“We’ll start at midnight tomorrow, and we’ll need some sort of transport to

get to the warehouse. How are Gunther's men moving the wildlife from the warehouse to the airport?"

"By truck. There are usually two of them parked at the back of the hangar."

"Then our only problem will be the security guys at the warehouse."

"My men will get rid of them. We dip our blowguns into the poison we scrape from the dart frog—"

"Whoa! No killing. I just want those thugs out of commission for a couple of hours."

"Then we'll use our knockout herbs. Once we put them to sleep, we'll take them to the Banyan tree and tie them up."

"Perfect!"

"Our spears with the sharp barbs can be used, too. And if we need them...our clubs."

Elejandro gave him a wry smile. "Only when it's absolutely necessary. Make sure Gunther's men are carried high up in the Banyan tree. We want them terrorized by bugs, not drowned. Now, once your men have the guards at the warehouse tied up, they can flood the airstrip."

"So, about those guards outside the warehouse... When do we attack them? What kind of signal will you give?"

"Those creeps might be communicating with the guards inside, so they

shouldn't be silenced too soon. Once your men notice our truck has arrived at the warehouse, they can silence the outside guards."

Ramiro smiled. "Leave it to my jaguar caller. He'll climb to the top of a high tree and make the sound of the male jaguar. We pull that trick whenever those thugs come lusting for our women.

"When the guards get out their flashlights and get ready to blind and kill what they think is a jaguar, our men will attack."

"I'd like your men to distract the inside guards, too. No blowguns. Robina and I will take care of them."

"I've got two monkeys in mind for the job. Once we knock out the outside guards, those monkeys will have those inside guards running around in circles."

"I hate to put your tribe's women and children at risk. But we'll need help with the animals in the warehouse once we get rid of the inside guards."

"I'll leave it up to my wife. Hundreds of her friends want their husbands out of that hellish mine site. So she should have no trouble rounding up women who want to see the last of Gunther and his men."

Chapter Ten

Back at the raft following her trip to the creek for her morning bath, Robina was surprised to see Elejandro sitting up in bed. “Good Morning! I’m so glad you finally slept through the night.”

“Those herbs I took did the trick.”

Cripes, she was naked, and not feeling the least bit embarrassed. *Well, shoot me in the belly button and call me holy.* She was going native. “I’ll go outside and pick some acai berries. How about berries and rice for breakfast?”

“Come here.” Elejandro’s voice, totally undisciplined, hinted at sin and liquid heat.

Looking into eyes filled with blatant desire, nostrils flaring and a face ruddy with excitement, she found herself reeling from anticipation. When she sat on the bed, Elejandro put his arms around her waist and pulled her close. “Where’s Jerry?”

“He took the canoe farther up river to fish. We’re down to rice and beans.” With both of them naked, and their juices flowing with shivering lust, the inevitability of the pleasure to come had her heart racing and her breathing

shallow.

To him, she might be no more than a momentary diversion. His interest in her would inevitably wane, and their affair would be over, leaving her damaged, but repairable. *Figgis-fiddis, that makes no sense*. He cared for her. And he swore his jaguar approved of her, too. She remembered his grandmother's words. And he had done what his grandmother had instructed—with yours truly. So, if he were truly in the market for a mate, she was up for grabs.

Being infatuated with the mystical shape shifter gave her a delicious “never want this moment to end” kind of feeling. At first, the attraction was buoyed along like a pleasant warm summer breeze, but it quickly turned into a roaring howling windstorm. Slamming into her heart, he'd drowned her in a floodtide of erotic fantasies.

Over and over again he kissed her, drugging her. Slow, gentle, leisurely, he covered her forehead, neck, cheeks, chin and eyelids with baby kisses. Holding the back of her head, his soft, moist, slightly parted lips nibbled her ear lobes and neck. When his tongue traced, teased and tickled the outer edges of her lips and began to play at the shallow end of her mouth, Robina melted and released the moan that had grown within her. Following an exquisite engagement of tongue sucking and entwining, Elejandro ramped up the tempo. Greedily, ravenously, with more intensity, he explored her mouth.

Running her fingers over the hard outlines of his gleaming copper muscles, she pushed her distended nipples against his chest and allowed lustful thoughts to take over her imagination. Imagining her quaking, shuddering body filled with sensual feline heat, she visualized crude imagery.

Part of Elejandro's makeup was a predatory lover, a feral creature, furry pelt and all. With sharper eyes, she saw the heat of his body flaming out with wild splashes of color: red, yellow and orange. Vibrating with an intense animal hunger, his penis that leapt to full attention, pushed at her fiery slit, steadily, insistently. Then, suddenly, he reduced his relentless tempo and achieved a slower beat, so she fell in sync.

Sliding down her body to her feet, he began to work his way back up. Accidentally, his stubbly face brushed against the delicate skin behind one of her knees, and a tingling thrill sent shivery goose bumps spilling over her skin. Following tender kisses on her inner thighs, he spread her moist folds and licked in and around her cleft.

The wetness oozed through her pubic hair and down her thighs, and her hips began to thrust rhythmically. Her moans and sighs didn't deserve a porno rating, although some of her explicit commentary would embarrass the hell out of her in retrospect.

What the hell was going on here? Participating in sexual play in the jungle,

was it just a game? Was Elejandro just serving up a round of pleasure while they teamed up on a rescue mission?

With her global wanderings rerouted when her plane went down, she now experienced a temporary glitch. Where did she go from here? Machu Picchu? Home? No bloody way. *Jam up and jelly tight*. She was here as long as this incredibly gorgeous hunk wanted her around. By exchanging his fluids with her, maybe he'd donated special feline abilities into her body. And the more of these magical DNA interactions, the better. Maybe their lovemaking would, over time, give her ever more powerful feline aspects.

Elejandro rocked her world. The thick moisture laden air and the jungle canopy above breathed in time with his fingers as he drove them into her quivering entrance, going in deep. Her body responded and kept in time with his thrusts while tightening the muscles in her passage. Replacing his fingers with his slithering, flicking tongue, wave after wave of heat made her skin throb and delicious sensations swept throughout her body in a riot of exquisite, maddening pulsations, a torrent of sheer pleasure.

With the heel of his hand rubbing her nub, his tongue did sinful things to the sensitive nerve endings inside her channel. With her delicate folds swollen, wet and eager, she felt a surge of desire building. Through the bed of palm leaves, the energy of the earth rose up through her.

Moments later, completely overwhelmed by his unrelenting tongue, her pelvic muscles relaxed and powerful contractions of pure pleasure swamped her. Brought close to completion, muttering primitive gibberish, she writhed in ecstasy and clawed at the blanket beneath her. Over the edge, out of control, she groaned and gave in to a shuddering release. By continuing to lap at her folds and crevices, Elejandro made it possible for her to not only to extend her orgasm, but to bask in the dreamy afterglow.

When she grabbed his hair, pulled him up and kissed him, he scrunched up his gorgeous visage. “Now sweetie, have you been taking those birth control herbs I gave you?”

“You bet. Sure hope they work as well as my own pills did. I don’t want to be a single mom bringing up children who can turn into jaguars in a wink of an eye. What will the neighbors think when one minute they see children playing in the back yard, and the next minute they see frisky cubs running around?”

His strained look softened. Placing her face between his hands, he ran his tongue over her moistened lips. Then, positioning his lightly furred hips between her legs, he pressed down on her, and his thick blue-black velvet hair fell forward and fanned over her breasts. With his penis pushed against her slick cleft, he began to gently slide it back and forth. Then, capturing her eyes, as if in preparation for analyzing her every response, he surged into her, filling her.

Drenched with desire, his hungry look penetrated her as powerfully as his penis. That look! That look! It changed. He made a partial shift. His mouth widened and she'd swear fangs made their appearance. Staring at him, half in wonder and half in fear, she moved her head off to the side and offered her neck. Here she was offering him a choice spot to bite. Strange. She felt closer to her feline instincts than ever before. *I think I've been bounced to another level. Hell's bells and buckets of blood!* He bit me! With a curse—circa seventeenth century pirate ships—on her lips, a university professor and his jaguar had laid claim to her.

Fireworks burst in front of her eyes and a massive sparkling wave of exquisite feeling swamped her and left her breathless. Gazing up at him, she noticed his four-inch fangs and jaw slowly receding. “You did a partial shift, didn't you?”

“Dammit, you're so desirable, I found it impossible to hold back on my primal need to mark you. Highly charged feral energy took over my body for just a moment—all the time needed to make you mine. Those tooth marks on your neck are there forever.”



Around twelve the next night, Elejandro hotwired a truck parked at the back of the hangar. When Robina and Jerry climbed into the back seat, he headed the truck down the trail leading to the warehouse. “Okay, you guys, get ready for a

bumpy ride.” Rain was steadily coming down turning the trail muddy and slick.

Robina tapped Elejandro on the back. “I didn’t see any of those ruffians guarding those planes out back. Maybe they take shelter from the rain when the boss isn’t around.”

Unable to avoid some of the potholes ahead, Elejandro cursed the rain that whipped furiously at the windshield. Then gearing down when he ran into a gap of foot-high jungle weeds, his passengers experienced a cheek-wrenching ride. When the left back wheel got stuck in a mud hole, Jerry got out of the truck and tried rocking it back and forth while Elejandro went from reverse to drive to reverse. No luck.

Jerry opened the passenger door, leaned in and pulled out the floor mats. “I’ll grab the shovel out of the back and dig out some of the mud in the direction we want to go. Then I’ll use these mats as traction. We’ll be moving in no time.”

Elejandro drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly once the truck moved onto level ground.

When Jerry banged on the back window indicating he intended to stay in the back, Robina turned and blew him a kiss. “Your prize student is a handy guy to have around. What would we do without him?”

Half an hour later, when the two front wheels sunk into mud about two miles from the warehouse, Elejandro waited for Jerry to put his “truck stuck” skills

to work. But following the vet's rug and shovel routine, and the professor doing his truck reversing and forwarding, the wheels still spun hopelessly, spitting out smoke and chewing up mud.

A few minutes later, Jerry poked his head in again. "Give me your machete. I need to blaze a trail to the nearest sturdy tree and hook up the winch cable."

Elejandro reached for the machete on the floor behind him and gave it to Jerry. "Good luck."

Jerry grabbed it. "We'll be on the move again in a few minutes. No problem."

Robina leaned forward. "Why don't Gunther's men have front-end loaders towing these trucks through the jungle?"

Elejandro groaned. "That's all we need now. The next thing you know, Gunther will smash through the rainforest and an asphalt road will run from one end of the island to the other. And the balance of nature in the rainforest will be shot all to hell."

Well slap my ass and call me Sally. "Come on, Elejandro, you know I was trying to be funny."

"Sorry. I'm just a little edgy. But if we don't get rid of Gunther, a road through the jungle won't be far off." As he watched Jerry wrap the cable around a tree and turn on the winch motor, he felt uneasy about that, too. The guy was so damn alive out there in all the muck, and Robina had a front row seat to his

performance. They were both twenty-five—and here he was in his mid-thirties. If she'd met Jerry first, he might not have captured her attention.

Tonight, while Robina and Jerry worked together without him in the picture, he wondered if she'd find herself attracted to the kid's energy, quick-thinking and derring-do. Not to be attracted to a gung-ho guy like him meant she was unemotional and aloof. But she was neither.

Dammit, he needed her in his life with a force he never questioned. *Okay, enough negativity.* She'd joked about being the mother of kids who interchanged body shapes. And being able to psych herself into an astral state and slip inside a female jaguar's body proved her determination to conquer her fears of opening herself up to her own power animal. So it wasn't too farfetched to think she treasured her new, sharper senses. And the thrill of experiencing even more feral aspects, or even a complete metamorphosis—maybe she hoped for outcomes like that. Inserting more of his DNA into her bloodstream might be the only requirement.

A short time later, Jerry rapped on the back window of the truck. "Okay, let's go."

Robina let out a cry of relief. "Yeah! Jerry to the rescue!"

When they were within sight of the large warehouse, Elejandro parked the truck in an open area off to the side of the road. Well, here was a chance for the

kids to show what a little teamwork could accomplish. After jumping out of the truck, he leaned inside. “Let’s get started. I’ll cover the periphery of the jungle.”

Robina slipped over to the driver’s seat. “You’ll be back by the time we’re ready to enter the warehouse. Right?” She laid her hand on his.

“If I’m not, you and Jerry will be fine.”



Robina searched his thoughts, only to find that he’d created a wall of secretiveness. Finding it impossible to bypass the barrier, she experienced a growing apprehension. *Just do it, just do it.* “Without the help of Ramiro’s men, Jerry and I can’t possibly handle all those animals. The question is, can we depend on them? They’ve been terrorized by Gunther and his men for so long now, they might give in to an urge to kill the bastards. So our animal rescue could turn into a bloodbath.”

“For God sake, Robina, think positive. Ramiro’s a strong leader. He won’t allow his men to jeopardize our plan. It’ll be one without any bloodshed.” In a matter of seconds, Elejandro disappeared into the jungle.

Moments later, as Robina crouched down on some discarded slabs of lumber, Jerry turned to her.”

“I’m going to check out the guard situation around the outside of that barn. Okay?”

Robina smiled to herself as she adjusted the plastic poncho she'd bought in Luizao, and patted the zip lock bag holding her camera.

On her parent's ranch, she'd never ridden the range without a camera. From the time she was seven, birding had been her passion. Flushing them out when they weren't too cooperative or searching for them in the fog, she'd done everything possible to get a good shot. So she felt confident when it came to videotaping proof of Gunther's inhumanity to the rare and exotic animals inside the warehouse.

Aiming her flashlight at Jerry's face when he returned twenty minutes later, she flinched when she caught sight of his icy image of contempt. "Dammit...those poor animals. What the hell is going on in that barn?"

"Calm down, Jerry. Save your energy. What's the situation outside?"

"Gunther's got four guards on duty. One on each side of the building. And they've placed a number of halogen lights outside, too. So, before we enter the warehouse, we have to wait until Ramiro's men smash those lights and tranquilize the guards. And keep in mind that gang of creeps have satellite phones. They could warn the guys inside...even contact the crew at the airfield."

"If more of those hoodlums come out here, they'll be forced to use flashlights. And Ramiro's men will find them easy targets." She grabbed Jerry's arm when a wavering, wailing call of a jaguar floated out across the jungle. Following

in quick succession, a flock of birds made an explosive takeoff. “That jaguar caller will be repeating that sound intermittently. Let’s hope it works.”

“The birds believe a jaguar is nearby, so those guards will, too.”

“Let’s not forget the main diversion. If the newly dug channel is to flow onto the airfield with any force, this downpour has to continue throughout the night. With any luck, that’ll be the case.”

Robina’s ears were open and she listened for any sound of a confrontation. Seconds later, she heard an animal grunting, men hollering, gasping for breath and crying out in pain. Exchanges of Spanish voices were delivered with military sharpness and men groaned as if heavily burdened. Closer now, she became aware of the rustle of bodies scurrying through the jungle growth. Then silence.

“Sssh...” Jerry grabbed her arm. “Someone is approaching.”

Ramiro stepped out of the thick undergrowth. “Can you believe it? The jaguar caller got an answer. When the four guards got out their flashlights, a real male black jaguar pounced on them from behind. And when they made a run for the warehouse, my men shot darts into them. They’re now being carried off to the Banyan tree. The insects will attack them. They’ll wish they had never followed Gunther.

“And the ditch to the air field is now completed. All we need to do is blow up the dam.”

“Great work,” Robina said. “Now...did your women and children agree to help us?”

“They’re ready and waiting for my signal.”

“Thanks for your hard work, Ramiro. Now it’s the time to release those two monkeys inside the barn. Once Jerry and I subdue the guards inside, we’ll haul them out of the warehouse. After your men drag them away, the women and children can come into the warehouse.”

Ramiro nodded and disappeared into the foliage.

Shortly after they stationed themselves a little closer to the building, Robina watched as two villagers, each one holding a spider monkey, made their way up to the large entrance. They opened the door and pushed the monkeys inside. “Okay. Let’s go, Jerry.”

When she opened the warehouse door and signaled for Jerry to follow, the deafening racket the two free roving monkeys stirred up left her momentarily stunned. “Those two gunmen... can you see them?” Jerry nodded. If there were more, she’d be forced to try to influence their behavior. But, even after a few successes, she needed more practice.

Robina strode into complete bedlam where grunting punctuated terrifying howls, squawking, chirping, hissing, whistling, hooting, shrieking and croaking. The lunacy of the situation was unbelievable. *Well, lightning’s struck the shithouse!*

Where's Elejandro? Dammit, she'd never been so scared in her life. She was just a cowgirl. She knew nothing about handling exotic and injured animals. Two baby monkeys threw around the shredded paper from the bottom of their open cage. Another dug into a burlap bag and threw seeds. Dozens more screamed for food and water. One of the fruit-eating spider monkeys, brought in to help create the pandemonium, got into a bucket of fruit and threw mangoes, bananas and pineapples in all directions. Rotting fruit and vegetables blended with fecal pellets and urine.

Black plastic bags filled with garbage, overturned by the other spider monkey, spilled out more excrement. Trampling in the muck, the young primate soon added even more stomach-wrenching odors to the already overpowering stench.

Her blood heated. Adrenalin rushed through her body. Almost numb with suppressed rage, scorn and contempt for the man responsible for this tragedy, she exploded into a burst of energy. Ignoring the animals pulling at their ropes and chains, rattling their cages and leaping against the bars, she plowed through the brightly lit mayhem. Her target was the hooligan with the large round face and brown eyes as glittery as a beetles. With her machete held straight out in front of her, she rushed at him.

When a monkey jumped up on her shoulder, she dropped the machete. This

gave the thug time to whip out his gun and step toward her. Slipping on some rotten fruit, he fell and the gun went off. The bullet shot into the ceiling and caused the noise level to subside somewhat. She took the opportunity to grab an iron pot from a nearby electric burner and smashed the guy in the face. Blood poured from his nose and ran in streaks over his mouth and neck.

While the dazed lout got to his feet and struggled to get his weapon in position to fire, Robina smashed his wrist with the pan and the gun flew out of his hand. Now weak and ineffective, he lost his balance and crashed against the table before he slipped to the floor.

The dazzling colors of a boa constrictor caught her eye as it uncoiled itself from a large attaché case that snapped open when the table shook. It ferociously presented itself inches away from the brute's face. Flicking its tongue and hissing, it appeared ready to wrap itself around the neck of a choice piece of meat. Not ready to become a boa's happy meal, the roughneck scrambled away on all fours like a man who'd experienced a previous run-in with a snake of the constrictor variety.

The vibrations in the air made the snake twist and squirm excitedly. Its infamous forked tongue—acting as eyes and ears—flashed out and tested the air. Estimating its length to be nine feet, putting it back in the case was out of the question. Back home, her parent's ranch teemed with prairie rattlesnakes and

she'd been bitten a few times.

Jerry came over to her. "I knocked the other guy out with my gun. And I noticed your guy got spooked. So they'll both be on their way to a tree-house-jail as soon as we get my guy out of here." Picking up the snake, he put it back in the attaché case. "These guys are harmless. Unfortunately, some people think they make great pets."

Shaking her head dolefully, Robina watched the monkeys tear around and raise the level of the noise and destruction. "It wasn't such a good idea to bring in those spider monkeys with complete mayhem already in place. I have no idea how to calm these animals. Where in the hell is Elejandro? I depended on him to help with this chaotic situation." What kind of game was he playing? *Just do it. Just do it.* A raw kind of grief for the jungle's primitive life forms made her stomach knot and her mind clog with doubts. Disconcerted, she crossed her arms and gave Jerry a penetrating stare.

"Hey, Miss Gloom and Doom, I'm a veterinarian, remember. So I'm bound to be of some use. Now help me get this other hooligan outside and welcome the women and kids. I'm sure they're used to being around mischievous monkeys and screeching parrots."

Holding on to the unconscious gunslinger's arms while Jerry grabbed his feet, Robina realized she'd been unable to place her trust in the vet. From what she

knew, this adventurous dude was the right person for this rescue mission. Why had she been so slow to realize that? Because he was the same age as she? Because of his fascination with monkeys? *Well strip my gears and call me shiftless.* Get real. Over the past three years, Elejandro found Jerry's smarts indispensable.

Jerry grinned maliciously when one of Ramiro's men reached for the mercenary's long thick head of hair and dragged him off into the night. "Ramiro told me his men will shave the heads of those guys before they tie them to the tree. And I'm sure those two losers are going to be really pissed off with their new looks."

Finding his assessment bang on, her gleeful smirk was impossible to squelch. "So I guess we better make ourselves useful."

When over thirty children and their mothers rushed in, they surrounded Robina. "I'm so glad everybody has baskets. Pick out the little animals that are sick. You can take them home with you. Give them food and lots of love."

A small girl about six, took her hand and led her over to a cage where a drugged silver titi monkey, with black forehead and red sideburns, peered out at them with sleepy eyes. Robina opened the cage and placed the animal in the basket the girl carried on her back. Adjusting the leather band looped around her forehead, the child carefully made her way over to her mother who stood by an older boy who held a scarlet macaw. Until Elejandro and Jerry came up with a better solution, the

monkey and bird were in safe hands.

Every chance she got, she snapped pictures of the distressed animals. Her heart went out to the toucan whose enormous deep orange bill bobbed up and down as the bird wheezed and coughed. A newly freed parrot, whose right eye was a tiny opening fringed in black, swooped down in front of her face. Jerry told her the birds were blinded in order to make them more docile. Baby birds showed signs of abuse, too. Some were missing toes and tail feathers. The fear and stress they endured must have been overwhelming.

When a howler monkey let out a roar, she let her doubts overwhelm her. What if every aspect of this daring animal rescue collapsed into a huge catastrophic tragedy? *There I go again! Jerry's here. Remember?*

As she continued to rush around taking pictures of the insanity, she saw Jerry. His clothes soaked with rain and perspiration, his brown hair slicked off his forehead—his pigtail no longer in place—he was the right man in the right place. In the midst of all the squeals, howls and children's cries of delight, his face glistened with passionate intelligence and a vital power.

The mothers gathered around him, eager to follow his instructions. They quickly realized he was the expert when it came to handling the animals. Though the flurry of helpful activity failed to bring down the noise level, or get some of the more obstreperous animals under control, a powerful sense of relief filled her like

an onrushing wind. Jerry performed like a man accustomed to being in command when hundreds of wild creatures presented him with one humungous emergency.

Chapter Eleven

Walking over to what appeared to be a small office, she looked inside. Behind a desk made of two sawhorses and a slab of wood, sat a woman with coffee-colored skin, a sprinkling of freckles on her nose and a thick braid of shiny black hair resting on her chest. A khaki shirt barely covered her wide shoulders and ample breasts. “My God, Veronica! What are you doing in here? Can’t you hear the ruckus going on in the next room?”

Veronica choked back a desperate laugh followed by a glazed look of utter wretchedness in her dark almond-shaped eyes. “I can hear it, but I didn’t think I could do anything about it. I thought Gunther’s men were raising hell out there. They’ve threatened to kill me if I step out of line, so I avoid them whenever I can.”

“But why are you here? Are you working for them?”

“I have to. If I don’t, they’ll kill me.”

“I can’t believe a strong beautiful young woman like you couldn’t tell those thugs to go to hell. Young women on this island are in short supply—so you can call the shots. When it comes to any man hurting you, no way.

“But if it weren’t for those evil buggers, I’d be dead. About two months ago,

my pet monkey, Felicita, ran off into the jungle, and I stupidly tried to find her and got hopelessly lost. And a couple of those gringos found me after I'd gone berserk for a week or so. They said that I either worked for Gunther or I was dead meat. So I started to work only half time at the café, and spent the rest of the day out here."

"I've taken a video of the craziness in this hellish place and I'm going to download it onto my computer. Then I'm going to upload it to YouTube. Animal lovers all over the world will be appalled at what's been going on in here. Those animals are crammed together like garbage. They're dehydrated, injured and in need of being hand-fed. And as for the birds...my God, they're missing tail-feathers, eyes, and toes.

"There are hundreds of creatures that can't be placed in the jungle right now. They need to be fed, cleaned and medicated. And those snake skins, bottled frogs and parts of animals have to be disposed of."

"I know. I know. But I'm swamped. Marmoset, ocelot and a margay cats are throwing up, too. The heat and humidity are over the top and I haven't been able to feed or water some of the animals for hours."

Veronica placed her elbows on the table, made fists of her hands and placed them under her chin. "Gunther's men brought me out here when some of the higher priced animals got sick. But I told those jerks I had no experience in nursing sick animals. So I just do the best I can. Gunther said he planned to get an animal

doctor and I could help him. But I don't see any vet around here, do you?"

Robina moved in fast. "You forgot to mention that Jerry's no stranger to you. That night I bought your camera, I'd asked you if you'd seen Jerry, and you said no."

Perspiration poured down Veronica's forehead, and she peered up at Robina as if she'd just awakened from a deep coma. "I panicked when two of Gunther's gunslingers came into the café. For two months, they've had me on tenterhooks. Gunther said he'd kill me if I did anything that would help the rebels and I was sure that he meant it. I've seen what his men do to the Latinos who join up with Ramiro. So no way would I say a word about Jerry with those creeps nearby."

Robina wanted to come across as insistent and strong. "Damn it, I'm the one milking this duck now. I want you here at the warehouse every day from now on. It'll be a full time job. Whatever those sick animals fed on in the canopy...that's the food you've got to find for them on a daily basis. Hand-feed them if you have to. The idea is to get them healthy and release them back into the wild."

Veronica threw out her arms in a hopeless gesture. "The warehouse is poorly equipped. Conditions aren't sanitary. I'll need help and money, lots of money."

"I'll find the money and get you some helpers. And I'll make sure you receive a salary. Are you up for it?"

"But Gunther won't allow it."

“Gunther will be taken care of. Now, if there’s anything incriminating here,” with her arm, she indicated the paperwork on the table, “I want it packed away in a safe place. Got it?”

“Got it.” When Veronica hit her forehead with the palm of her hand, it looked like she tried to get the attention of a mind driven by a raging madness.

Leaving the room, Robina walked over to Jerry. “Veronica Guzman is in the other room. You’ve probably run into her before.”

“Yeah, I saw Veronica while I was in Gunther’s headquarters. She looked so damn unhappy, I wondered if she was a prisoner like me. But I never got a chance to talk to her. One of the hoodlums whisked her away and I never saw her again.”

“Well, she’s offered to help the women and kids ‘til their men pick them up. So it’s time for us to think about stopping Gunther before he takes off in his chopper.”

“Right. Once Ramiro’s men get those two inside guards to the Banyan tree, that’s their signal to blow up the dam.”

When Robina heard an immediate buzz of activity in the large warehouse, she turned and stared at the scene in the middle of the room. Women and children with their baskets full of animals in need of some loving medical care gathered around Veronica. She wasted no time showing Robina how eager she was to help.

The racket in the warehouse stopped. It was so quiet Robina could hear the

rain battering against the building. High above, in the loft above the front doors, where most of the empty crates were stacked, stood a black jaguar. The backlighting from the half moon filtering through the mosquito netting made his glossy coat gleam and his rosettes stand out darker than ever. Was he Elejandro's jaguar? *Is a pig's rump made of pork?*

As the cat looked down on the animals below, his eyes flashed golden, and the noisy throng responded instantly. They appeared to understand every aspect of the jaguar's code of behavior. He'd somehow entered into some kind of telepathic communion with the deeply traumatized and utterly terrified animals. Now in a general state of calm, they organized themselves into orderly groups in front of the door.

The black sleek animal then tread down the stairs on softened paws, walked to the open front door and slipped out into the early morning mist that came in with the dawn.



On the way to the airport, Robina exhaled a long ragged breath as sodden red earth splashed up and sprayed both sides of the truck. Everything had happened so fast after Elejandro pulled Jerry out of the coffin in the chopper, she'd never taken the time to get a good look at the guy. He was either out in the muck and rain pulling the truck out of pot holes or trying to subdue disturbed animals.

Taking note of his virile nose and the determined line of his square chin, she found him quite attractive. The jury was out on whether she liked his brown hair combed back into a short ponytail. Right now, however, without the eighties' hairstyle, presto change-o, eye candy.

Jerry glanced sideways, his blue eyes wide with concern. "Elejandro never told us he planned on transforming himself into his jaguar. Did you know what he was up to?"

"No, I was kept in the dark, too. But what a scene! The way those animals responded to the black jaguar's presence. They seemed to know, instinctively, that their ruler and protector was going to escort them back to their homes in the jungle."

"To have the shamanic ability to become a jaguar on command—an animal that is still feared and revered. How great is that? I had no idea he was a shape shifter until we began to work together. If the kids back on campus knew their professor was a jaguar, too, his botany classes would've been filled to capacity—standing room only."

"Let's hope the jaguar's silent 'walk without fear' attitude will allow the animals to find their families within the jungle chaos."

"With all that jaguar focused power, they have everything going for them."

As the rain lashed at the windshield, her thoughts drifted back to the

warehouse. “I sure hope Veronica’s able to hold everything together. Those sick animals need attention.”

Jerry’s lips tightened into a thin line. “You could’ve been killed when we went after those gunmen in the warehouse. If anything happened to you in that madhouse, Elejandro’s world would stop spinning. I’ve never seen him so happy. For three years, he resigned himself to a single life, never dreaming he’d love a woman who wasn’t fearful of his alternate body.”

Well, if that don’t put pepper in the gumbo. “Thank you for the inside information, Jerry. I owe you one.” Reminding herself of the strong role Jerry would play in her life, she decided to start balancing the scales by being up front with him. “I’m telepathic...getting better at it all the time. But Elejandro sometimes gets edgy when I try to read his thoughts; he often puts up a psychic shield.”

“Come on, Robina, you don’t want to know everything Elejandro’s thinking. Where’s the fun in that?”

A half hour later, after they’d exhausted their talk, Robina thought about the shocking situation back at the warehouse. “Getting all of the animals, birds, reptiles and amphibians back into the wild isn’t possible. Some of them are just too damaged. What will they do with the ones that can’t cope in the jungle?”

“Sure hope we get a chance to pack some of the sick animals onto the yacht. Once Elejandro gets them over to his lodge, we can give them the care they need.”

Within sight of the airport, Jerry maneuvered the truck between dense shrubbery. “If we’re to catch Gunther before he escapes, we’ve got to move fast.”

Robina jumped out of the truck and dashed across the open field with Jerry close behind. Hiding behind the rampant foliage off to the side of the hangar, she used her binoculars to get a look at the runway. “Meu Deus! Ramiro’s team did a great job!” The man-made creek was spilling onto the airfield in great gushes making it impossible for aircraft to use it.

“The chopper’s sitting on the hangar roof. But it looks like those two small planes on the runway are stuck in the mud, and Gunther’s men are using forklifts to pull them up onto dry land. So let’s check out the office. There’s always a chance Gunther’s in there. With his men out front, maybe we’ll get a chance to tie him up.”

They barely managed to cover a few feet when a shot rang out. A bullet whizzed by Robina’s head and slammed into a giant tree trunk off to her right. Two mercenaries crashed out of the undergrowth. One of them, a tall, hulk of a man wearing gumboots, baggy shorts, an eye patch and a baseball cap worn backwards, swung Robina around and used duct tape to tie her hands behind her back.

“You’re dead if you give me any trouble,” he said, pushing his gun into her back.

Jerry let out a string of Spanish cuss words after a short, dark-skinned bald man slugged him on the chin.

As they sloshed through the water on the way to the hangar, Robina shuddered at the thought of meeting the loathsome horror—*proof that evolution can go in reverse*—she'd caught a glimpse of back in the Luizao pub.

Gunther sat behind his makeshift desk; the personification of a powerful, malicious automaton who crushed men without remorse. His depthless dark eyes darted from her to Jerry, his crooked grin lending a searing icy resolve to his features. “Well, well, what have we here? The great animal doctor? The monkey lover who refused to help me out. So...what are you two doing around here?” Gunther’s voice took on a gravelly and mocking tone. “What in the hell is going on? My chopper’s empty and ready for take-off. But the truck drivers haven’t shown up with the animals I ordered.”

The coal-black holes serving as Gunther’s eyes squinted lasciviously at Robina. “My God, you’re one sharp little bitch, aren’t you? You must be the one who broke into my chopper and set Jerry free. Not smart. And what’s happening over at the warehouse? Has that black jaguar killed my men? Have Ramiro’s men taken over the place?”

He showed no sign of bringing his rant to a close. “Don’t tell me. I already know. Veronica contacted me. She told me all hell had broken loose at the

warehouse. So I knew the goddamn rebels must've taken over. All my plans have gone to hell. That earthquake caused the complete collapse of the Zoala cave. And less and less gold is coming out of that cursed mud hole. The miners have slowed down production, and I haven't been able to produce any ingots lately. So I'm getting the hell away from this bloody island."

Robina looked up when she heard the pulsating, buzzing whine of the helicopter's rotors starting up. The makeshift hangar shook and the distinctive smell of aviation fuel filled the room.

Gunther jumped out of his seat. "I just ordered my pilots to get the chopper in the air because I'm outta here."

"The Libre's taking off," shouted a thickly muscled guy.

"I'm the only one getting on my chopper," Gunther roared, "the rest of you can find other ways off this god-forsaken island. There's my new Cessna out back. Too bad none of you guys learned how to pilot a plane."

"What the hell!" The tall guy with the eye patch bellowed. "Goddamn you. You said we could get on the chopper."

"That's before I found out the animal warehouse is in the hands of Ramiro's men." Gunther made a dismissive gesture toward Robina and Jerry as he ran over to the other side of the hangar. "Take care of those two before you go. They've been helping Ramiro's gang." A door in the roof yawned open, and when a rope ladder

was thrown down, Gunther grabbed it. Scrambling up like a deranged monkey, he disappeared.

“Come on you guys,” the disgruntled muscle-bound creep bellowed, “now’s the time to make a break for it. Forget about those two assholes.”

The guy who held Jerry pushed him against the desk. “I’m right behind you, Ron. The boss’s got half a mil in that suitcase.”

As soon as Jerry removed the tape from her hands, Robina ran for the ladder. But, by the time she reached the roof, the last guy had vaulted up to the hatchway and the idling chopper slowly took off. Whup, whup, whup. The shaking rotors, dipping up and down as they turned, faster and faster.

Taking out her binoculars, Robina watched in horrid fascination as two condors flying at warp speed closed in on the chopper. Moments later, the birds appeared to be buzzing the pilots, and she sensed impending disaster. The pilots feverishly tried to avoid them.

Jerry grabbed the binoculars. “Sorry, but I have to see what’s going on. If I didn’t know better, I’d say those condors are trying to spook the pilots. And they’re having trouble getting the chopper to gain altitude. Looks like they’re headed for a collision.”

“Give me those glasses!” Robina saw the rotors wobble and the chopper began to spin in ever-tighter circles as it lost altitude. Nosing toward the ground,

tall trees ripped off the tail rotor, and it hurtled toward a towering waterfall. A loud metallic noise was heard, somewhat like the sound of two cars smashing into one another. As fragments of rotors flew into the air, the fuselage dropped into the water.

Due to the slope and elevation of the waterfall, she was able to see the action at the foot of the falls. As the fuselage slowly sunk, she caught a glimpse of Gunther trying to open the twisted and jammed door. When he managed to open it a few inches, he pushed out his snakeskin suitcase. He appeared to have the use of only his left arm, but none of his men helped him.

Two of his thugs succeeded in pushing out a window. But, because they'd panicked, both were trying to get out at the same time and were hopelessly stuck. The third thug had the sliding door in the cargo area partway open when the turbulence at the foot of the falls thundered down on the wreck and swallowed it up.

The last person she saw was Gunther desperately trying to squeeze his stocky body through the door's narrow opening. "Gunther and his cronies are dead. Good riddance. Now there are a few less crooks to tear up this island." Turning to Jerry, she gave him the binoculars. "Here, have a look."

"Gunther's surfaced! Instead of heading for shore, he's going after his suitcase. He's only got the use of one arm. Here, you have to see this." Robina

grabbed the binoculars. “And that arm’s now wrapped around the suitcase and it’s keeping him afloat. He’s kicking his feet, but he’s powerless to keep the suitcase from being drawn under the falls. Oh my God, a rotor blade high above broke loose from the cliff. It’s caught up in the water. Bloody hell, it landed on Gunther! He’s gone under!” Her stomach clenched, and she found it impossible to steady her thumping heart. “Now I can see the suitcase and the rotor bobbing around, but no Gunther. Take a look.”

“He’s a goner for sure. His money led him to a watery grave. That chunk of rotor must’ve killed him on impact.”

“Weird, eh? Nature’s sure working in our favor today.”

“Maybe there are still parts of that chopper imbedded in that cliff. Hey, there’s a black jaguar standing up there...just to the side of the falls. Do you think—”

Robina reached for the binoculars. “Elejandro! It’s Elejandro!” *Shit fire and save matches!* A fiery-eyed black jaguar, with its fur radiant in the morning sun, shining glossy as coal, gazed up at the two condors that now flew majestically along a warm current of air. “Damn it. I’ve got to get some pictures of the animals as the jaguar returns them to their homes. But how? I don’t see any animals with him now, so they could be miles away. And he has the power to return to them in short order.”

“You’re a photographer?”

“Yep. Since I was a kid, bird watching’s been my passion. I got some pictures of the terrible conditions back at the warehouse. And I plan on uploading my videos to YouTube. Animal lovers all over the world will be up in arms.”

“We might be able to catch sight of the animals in a plane. Gunther said there’s a Cessna out back.”

“You can fly a plane?” She followed him to the other side of the roof.

“I got my solo pilot license after a training period in a Cessna. Look, there it is. It’s sitting on high enough ground that the water has yet to reach it. And there’s just enough room for a takeoff.”

Robina quickly climbed down the ladder. “I’ve got to get my camera out of the truck.”

Running over to a board hanging on the wall behind Gunther’s desk, Jerry removed some keys. “I’ve got the keys.” He jangled them in the air. “There’s bound to be a parachute in the plane. Have you done any parachute jumping?”

“Yeah,” she shouted as she followed him out of the hangar, “in tandem with an instructor. And he went through the jump to landing routine with me many times. I’m sure I can do it alone.” *Am I in for a walk off home run in the bottom of the ninth? Sudden death? Sayonara?* Elejandro whispered in her ear, “Just do it. Just do it.”

By the time Robina entered the cockpit with her camcorder, Jerry sat in the

pilot's seat. Picking up a jump suit and parachute from the co-pilot's seat, he helped her get into them.

Giving her a searching look as she sat back in her seat, he grinned broadly. "I'm just like a little kid. I'm so damn excited about flying again. Gunther's dead, so the plane belongs to the rehab center." Confidence filled his blue eyes and she heard the vibrancy in his voice. "I'm sounding like a complete whack job, aren't I? Sorry about that. I'll be calm in a matter of seconds. I've got a lot of flying hours behind me, so you can trust me. I'll take you up about one thousand feet then you can drop in on the jungle wherever you want."

Once they were in the air, Robina gazed down into the canopy. "Surely we can spot a procession of hundreds of animals." Was it just a week ago she nearly died in a plane crash? And here she was ready to put her life on the line again. Scared, terribly scared, but at the same time excited. She was going to get a chance to 'bring the jaguar down from the tree.' No way was her accident going to keep her glued to the ground.

Looking down at the sea of green, she got out her binoculars and searched for signs of movement. "There...by the river!" Below on the forest floor, hundreds of animals were lined up drinking from a small lake. "Can you get me over that spot?"

Walking on her knees to the door, she opened it and looked down. Counting to three out loud, she jumped. Whoosh! She shot through the air, and

the wind rushed over her face. Arching her back, hands up, chin up and pelvis out. Amazing, not really a feeling of falling but of floating. Calm, she felt calm. Almost immediately, she pulled the rip cord, and began to breathe again. She aimed for the beach, but less than a minute later, giant leaves scraped against her and threatened to eat her alive. Jerked to a stop when she landed on a wide branch, she frantically struggled to get her knife out of her pocket.

Once she'd cut every line holding her harness, she tried in vain to catch sight of the ground below. The tree was impossibly vine-tangled. Its broad waxy leaves prevented her from getting any idea of how high up she was. With no fixed rope to rappel down and no safety harness, she felt stymied. Stunned when she found herself the object of a black jaguar's unwavering stare, she screamed and clung to the tree. With his teeth, the beast grabbed her by the back of her jumpsuit. Gently breaking her hold on the tree, it carried her slowly and carefully down the prickly trunk.



Robina's rubber boots made a sucking noise in the soggy soil, and the feet of the animals in front of her echoed the sound. The light rain continued, and coupled with the hazy fog should've made for gloomy surroundings, but it didn't. As she trod along taking pictures, the moisture laden air became magical fairy dust.

The rich heavy smells, thick with fresh forest growth, filled her nostrils.

Shadowy trees and shrubs shook from the onslaught, and she imagined them slurping up the water. Throbbing energy surrounded her and she felt connected to the universal field of the spirit. The physical and spiritual worlds were inseparable. Elejandro gave her proof of that.

She lost all sense of time. The jaguar's power eclipsed everything. Everything. Guided by the cat's loving intelligence, totally under his spell, eagles, parrots, predators and prey, flew side by side. Howling monkeys and growling wildcats raced each other in and out of the trees. Soon so much happened, it proved quite difficult to keep up with the action.

At the river, she got some great shots. The alligators and enormous boa constrictors slipped through the floodwaters bearing black tarantulas and spotted turtles on their backs. And when Harpy eagles dropped baby caimans into the water, she caught that moment, too.

With the power to read the environment, the black jaguar directed his displaced charges. All the insects, reptiles and mammals remained under his spell until they found their homes. Jerry told her gold crested eagles were worth five thousand dollars on the black market. Spix's macaws, that would've fetched as much as forty thousand dollars in Europe, were no longer for sale in the lucrative wild animal black market. They were back in their chosen environment high up in the rainforest canopy. Their natural biological instincts kicked in, and they

assimilated into the wild again.

Being alone with the jaguar on the way back to the raft, she slowly recovered from the sensory overload. The richness of the sweeping operation that unfolded under the cat's direction, turned out to be the stuff of dreams. She imagined how her pupils must've dilated as the intense intrigue of the panorama began to unfold. Every image of the animal's reintegration, forever imprinted on her retina, burned into her brain. Clear and detailed. And she'd captured the surreal happening in a two-hour video complete with an exotic soundtrack.

By the time they reached the trail leading to the raft, the immense changes in the cat's features caught her up in a flight of fancy. With no trees dimming the sun's rays, she saw Elejandro's human face. Not quite formed yet, it still displayed the look of a cat with its small rounded ears and slanted eyes. An exotic look, and for some strange reason her emotions whirled and currents of desire flamed out.

Elejandro gazed up at her but said nothing.

Wrapped up mind, body and soul in the splendor of a research scientist, she'd fallen for him and all his complex psychic quirks. A man-jaguar! Yeah, she said it. She'd opened herself up to a new level of consciousness. And when it came to accepting the shifter's jaguar as a trusted friend, no problem. She recalled the animal's stare. Mesmerizing. Penetrating. All-knowing. Without the beast's climbing skills, she'd still be sitting in a tree, unknown feet above the ground.

With Elejandro's complete metamorphosis, his naked body had Robina catching her breath. Tight abs, sculpted thighs, golden eyes and tousled long black hair whipped up her fantasies and stimulated the heat in her belly. The man's sensual magnificence punched her in the gut all right, but as for jumping his bones—bad idea.

“A little way down this path,” he said, “I stashed an extra pair of pants and a shirt.”

“Wow! The energy you burned up must be off the charts! You covered a lot of territory.”

“Sixty square miles at least.”

“You're kidding me.” *Jeez, the animals were scattered from hell to breakfast!* “I had no idea we had covered such a vast territory.”

“You're an animal, too. The jaguar stripped your psyche bare and manipulated your perception.” Elejandro's voice sounded a little hoarse and he rubbed his eyes from time to time.

“I reached a new level of consciousness and I didn't even know it?”

“Right. You were put in touch with an interconnecting cosmos.”

“It's amazing! Amazing!”

Chapter Twelve

When Elejandro and Robina arrived at the raft, Jerry hugged them both. “How did you make out?”

“Black jaguar did it!” Robina exhaled a long sigh of satisfaction. “It was a successful operation. The animals are all back where they belong...with their own groups and families. You could hear the brothers and sisters of the baby monkeys calling out for them. The orphans are being cared for, too. I’ve got it all on video.”

“Now, what about Gunther?” Elejandro asked. “Is he tied up somewhere?”

“Like you don’t know,” Jerry said, “What about those two condors flying as fast as diving falcons? I’ve never seen them act so out of character. You directed them into spooking those helicopter pilots, didn’t you? By treating the chopper like a large bird, they sent Gunther and his lackeys to a watery grave.”

Spreading her arms, Robina mimed the actions of the birds. “We’re going this way. No, we’re going that way. Then the pilots must’ve made an error in judgment.”

Elejandro tried his best to convey a tortured dullness of disbelief. “Come on you guys. A gust of wind must’ve pushed them along and confused them. So here’s

to their smooth soaring from now on. And no more worries about aircraft.”

Jerry laughed. “You can’t kid us. Those heavy birds were under your control, Doc. I can’t believe how you’re able to get inside animals’ minds. If I owned that kind of moxie, I’d be the best goddamn vet in the world.”

“My jaguar had nothing to do with that crash. Some black jaguar just happened to be at the scene when those birds were pushed off their normal warm thermal updraft. That’s my angle on the cause of the crash, and I’m sticking to it.”

“Whatever!” Jerry’s eyes held humor and pride as he rolled his eyes at Robina. “By now, the people in Luizao will know about the raid on the animal warehouse. And there will be stories about a brave shape-shifting herbal doctor making the rounds.”

“No, no, no,” Elejandro said, “let’s forget about my part in the animal rescue. Ramiro’s men are unaware of my ability to shift into a jaguar. Let’s keep it that way. It’s okay to talk about a strange black jaguar magically leading the animals to freedom. But, from what I’ve noticed over the years, word of mouth isn’t always the best way to get news. But that’s the way the Latinos are kept up to date on the island. As the report of the animal rescue is relayed from one person to the next, it’ll get more and more wildly inaccurate. All kinds of versions will be believed.”

Jerry roared. “Whatever you say, man. It’s the only way to go. Some of the guys who were on Gunther’s payroll might be looking for someone to blame for

their fall from power. And they'll be out for your hide if they find out about your alter ego. That black jaguar's been messing with their minds. Big time."

"You've got the idea, kid. I'm just the gentle herbalist who came here to get his stolen stuff back."

Robina obviously enjoyed their humorous wrap-up. She gave him an exaggerated wink and her face lit up with the kind of deep smile Elejandro hadn't seen for some time now. "And I guess it wasn't your black jaguar that scared the hell out of those guys guarding the outside of the warehouse. Those gunslingers had planned on blinding a nearby male jaguar with their flashlights and then shooting him. They weren't prepared for an attack from the rear."

"Amazing," Elejandro said, "that jaguar caller's instrument must've made a true imitation of the jaguar's drawn-out grunt-growl. To have it answered by a real jaguar must've made it easy for Ramiro's men to shoot their darts into those killers."

A satisfied light came into Robina's green eyes. "Ramiro and his men, with tranquilizing darts, and the help of some flooding, routed those thugs. And two condors brought down Gunther's chopper killing all on board. So everyone will be celebrating. That gang's hold on the villagers has come to an end."

"They'll be celebrating all right," Elejandro said, "and while they get used to a life without an evil dictator directing their lives, I think it's best for us to head

back to my compound.”

Robina patted her backpack after she set it on the raised bed. “Great! The sooner we get to your lodge, the sooner I can get my video onto YouTube. And animal lovers of the world will see what happens to animals captured by smuggling rings. It’ll raise support for the organizations committed to wildlife conservation.”

Jerry regarded Elejandro quizzically as if unsure about sharing his thoughts. “The animal warehouse...I want to run it as a rehabilitation center for orphaned and sick animals. All those satellite phones and tech equipment Gunther has in his headquarters...I could make good use of them. Some of the electronic equipment is yours, of course...the ones Gunther stole from you.”

Robina gasped. “All your records, Elejandro. He might’ve deleted them.”

“No. No. They’re safe. Everything relating to my herbal center is on CDs back at the lodge.”

Jerry crossed his arms and pointedly stared at Elejandro. “Come on. Tell me what you think? You know me better than anyone else. Am I ready to take on a wildlife haven?”

Elejandro smiled in approval. “I think you’ll do just fine. You’ll have that animal shelter up and running in no time. And I’ll help you any way I can.” Straightening his shoulders, he patted Jerry on the back. “And my first gesture of

assistance comes in the way of money. At least I hope it's money, in the silver suitcase that fell out of the chopper."

Jerry let out a howl. "I saw Gunther grab that suitcase before he left the hangar and took off for his chopper. Meu Deus, can I make use of that cash! I heard one of his men whisper, 'Half a mil. He's got half a mil.' I think his cronies were about to kill him and run off with the cash."

Robina gave Jerry a hug. "We watched Gunther using that suitcase as a floating device, but we never gave a thought to what was in it. Weird, eh?"

Jerry gave her a kiss full on the lips. "As soon as I knew Gunther was dead, my thoughts flew to that new Cessna."

"And I only had eyes for that gorgeous black jaguar standing at the top of the falls."

"And now," she said, placing her hand on Jerry's forearm, "before you forget my contribution to your new venture, I must remind you that I supplied you with a helper, Veronica Guzman. The lass promised to stay and work with the animals full-time. I don't think she can forgive herself until all those animals are on the road to recovery."

"Ah, Veronica. I was impressed with the way she took over the warehouse last night. The women and kids looked like they hung on to her every word. Maybe she can come up with a few more volunteers—"

Elejandro interjected. “Before I reclaim my yacht and Robina and I head for my lodge, I’ll round up my satellite dish, phone, computers and TV. The canoe is yours, Jerry. We’ll keep in touch by computer.” Robina definitely admired Jerry. But, by encouraging Veronica to work with him, it proved that his jealousy was unfounded. Robina’s love for him was steadfast and authentic.

“And by plane,” Jerry said. “I’ll be able to fly some of the sick animals over to your compound. We can continue working together.”

Robina cleared her throat. “Before we tear out of here and pile into the canoe, don’t we need some sleep?”

Jerry laughed. “I can do that. But it won’t be easy. I’ll be dreaming about a shit load of money being gobbled up by huge waves.”

Elejandro searched Robina’s face and tried to read her thoughts. He’d lost Jerry as a steady companion, and if the love of his life took off, his world would crash. “Now let me get us something to eat. It’s a bad idea to eat before we nap, but I’m so damn hungry.” He’d induced the highest form of transformation today—his inherited eternal spark. But damn it, he experienced such a buzz in his body, it drove him almost crazy. The urge to take Robina by the hand and lead her into the jungle came on so strong, he desperately needed to squash it.

Diversionary tactics roused him to action. He got the fire going and set about making arepas.

Later, after they'd eaten, Jerry acted like a volcano about to erupt. "I'm sorry, I just can't stop thinking about that money floating out to sea." He yawned and then rolled out his sleeping bag. "Come on guys, bedtime. And there's to be no fooling around."



The following morning, when they were all together in the canoe, Elejandro tried to remember the route he'd taken when he'd first wandered off course on the way to Luizao last week. "This river has so many tributaries, you guys will have to bear with me."

"No problem," Jerry said, "I won't distract you. If you want to psych yourself into reading the geographical layout of the island, go right ahead."

"GPS, GPS, Elejandro here. Give me directions to the waterfall."

Jerry's face split into a wide grin, and he pulled on the diamond stud decorating his ear. "Everybody listen for the sound of the waterfall. Or a plane. Maybe there's a pilot or two who doesn't know the runway's flooded."

For the next half hour, Robina kept up a running dialogue with Jerry. They talked about clearing the airport runway, acquiring equipment and supplies and constructing a bunkhouse for part time workers. They left Elejandro free to draw on his navigational powers without interruption.

After finding the falls, Elejandro tied the boat well away from the spray

filling the air. “Good luck, you two.”

“I know it’s a crap shoot,” Jerry said, “That suitcase might be long gone. So I’ve got to be ready for disappointment.” He jumped out of the boat and began to shed his clothes.

Robina kissed Elejandro, stepped onto the beach and slapped Jerry on the back. “I can’t see the suitcase floating around on this side, so let’s swim under the falls.” She stripped down to her underwear and dove into the water.

With powerful strokes, she swam over to the falls where power, electricity and energy surrounded her and sent a thrill through her body. The spray soaked her as she took in a huge breath, doubled over and slid smoothly under the falls. From the far side of the vast chamber, she heard the sound of children’s voices. She shook her hair free of water and looked over at them. A young girl and two boys chattering excitedly and when they saw her, they pointed at her. “Red! Red!” they shouted in unison.

“Wasn’t that a thrill!” Jerry exclaimed, as he popped up beside her and tried to unplug his ears. “The energy in this place...can you feel it?”

Robina nodded at the three children. “It seems to be a favorite play spot for those kids.”

“They’re swimming this way. Think they’re going to drown us?” Jerry said with a smile.

A little dark haired girl took the lead. Grinning from ear to ear, she pointed at Robina's hair. "Red. Red. Follow me! I got a surprise for you."

Jerry looked at Robina. "Come on, let's check out the surprise. I don't see any silver suitcase floating around in here."

Robina followed the naked children as they swam under the waterfall and over to the bank of the river opposite to where Elejandro waited. Jerry stayed close behind her.

The girl stood on the muddy bank, her arms akimbo. "You stay here. I'll be right back." With her two pals in close pursuit, she disappeared into the jungle.

Startled when a middle-aged, short Latino man ran toward them, she marveled at his appearance. His skin resembled the leather on an old boot, but his muscles indicated he kept himself in great physical shape.

"I'm Jose. Benita, my grandchild...I take her camping. Yesterday, she found a suitcase on the other side of the waterfall. It must've fallen out of the chopper that crashed into the cliff." He shouted over the noise of the thunderous rumbling waterfall. "Ramiro told me it belonged to a red-headed lady. I was going to take it into town today and look for you. But here you are!"

With her friends trailing close behind, the little girl came out of the bushes carrying a silver suitcase. After handing it to Robina, she began to jump up and down. "It's money, you know. Ramiro said it's no use to him. But you can use it."

You can...can't you?"

"Thank you, I sure can." She hugged the child to her chest. "I'm your friend forever. If you ever need me, I'll come running."

A delightful smile lit up Benita's big dark eyes. She broke free from Robina's embrace and, after swinging around in a circle, she spoke excitedly. "You're going to live here, aren't you? Ramiro said you'd take care of the sick animals in the big barn. The money will pay for the stuff you need."

Jerry dropped to his knees, reached for Benita and held her hands. "I'm the one who will take care of the animals. For returning the money to us, I'd like to give you a reward. I'll leave my canoe over there—he pointed to the canoe on the opposite shore—with Ramiro. You can pick it up when you're back home. When you're older, you can take a ride along the river to where Robina lives. You'll need someone strong with you. In one spot the river gets very dangerous."

"I have my very own canoe?" When Jerry nodded, Benita's eyes sparkled, and she turned to her friends. "I get a prize! That real big canoe over there!" She let out another joyous shout and led her friends back into the water.

Jose glowed with pride. "I will make sure she has some gas and a strong friend when she's old enough to make that long trip. Thank you so much."

Jerry shook his hand. "I guess you know the chopper that went down was Gunther's."

Jose smiled and clapped his hands. “Yes. And Ramiro told me a few of his gang members drowned with him. But that evil man needed to die a slow death. My village has suffered. And it will take us a while to get back to our old ways.” After a salute to Robina and Jerry, the lush foliage swallowed him up.



Robina breathed in the high concentration of energy found in Elejandro’s herbal hut. The rhythmic breathing of her surroundings further cemented her perception of a world that had shifted on its axis. This pulsating montage, a combination of humid warmth, earthy smells and plant aromas stretched out as a wondrous field of undiscovered knowledge.

Elejandro kept busy watering his plants, so she left the hut and walked to the end of the vegetable garden. Stepping into the jungle, she took off her clothes, covered herself in Elejandro’s magic bug repellent and lay down in a hammock tied to a couple of trees. Surrounded by a high concentration of plant and animal life, she sucked in the energy of the jungle. The spirits of the all-encompassing forest soon claimed her.

Everything that lived was a relative of hers. Trees, animals, even stones. With her imagination in high gear, more of her psychic hidden gifts continued to open up. Absorbing her power animal’s raw unbridled instincts and performing a complete transformation might never happen, but she’d continue to work on it.

Elejandro's jaguar spirit filled her soul: she now embraced the life and power of the night and expressed her sexuality more fully.

When Elejandro found her, she rolled out of the hammock and dropped to the ground where the leaves were crisp and dry. Reaching up, she grabbed his hand and pulled him down beside her. During the past few days, caught up in a web of passion and untamed lust, a need to taste Elejandro's glorious body drove her almost out of her mind. "Your otherworldly energy...I can feel it whenever I touch you. And I no longer have to work my way through your seven veils to get to the core of you." *St. Peter on a popsicle stick! I can almost hear his jaguar hissing as he twitches his tail. He dances deep inside him like a mysterious darkness, alive and powerful.*

"Seven veils? You're kidding! Most of the time I'm almost completely naked. Like now." Elejandro settled into the leaves, facing her.

Raising herself up on one elbow, she gave him a thoughtful smile. "The dangerous nature of your shape shifts is one veil—cripes, it must hurt every time you do it. The ecstasy of the transformation rates as mystery number two—crossing the threshold between reality and non-reality— alternately thrilled and chilled me." She ran her hands over his sleek chest. "To watch your skin change into the thick, black, glossy pelt of your jaguar, the most powerful predator in the jungle...I thought my heart would pound its way right out of my chest. Fortunately. I got a small taste of that kind of power when I merged with the

female jaguar while in astral form.

“The third veil I ripped aside relates to the side effects of your shift. Even after you’re back into human form, the jaguar’s power remains with you. For a while there, I didn’t know whether you were ready to take on a lover or take no prisoners. Getting up close and personal with your powerful beast serves as veil number four. I struggled to work my head around that one. But I understand where he’s coming from now. He’s my hero. I hugged him so hard as he carried me down a giant tree like a sack of potatoes, I think I might’ve cut off his breathing for a minute or two.

“Right now I can’t come up with the other three veils. But you get the idea...right? You’re not just a regular Joe, you and your alter-ego are damn complicated.”

Elejandro reached for her, and her heart lurched when he began to kiss her with a slow thoroughness. “I’ve got plans for us. Before it gets too dark, I’d like us to try something different. Is that okay with you?” He jumped up and walked toward the herbal hut.

“I trust you, you know that by now.”



When Elejandro returned, he carried two large bowls. “In this bowl, I mixed the red dye from some achiote seeds. In this bowl, I extracted the pigment of an

immature fruit of the jagua tree. Now dip your fingers into the jagua mixture. The paste looks clear, but when it's applied to your skin, oxidation takes place. It'll gradually turn light blue, then dark blue, then black." After dipping his hand in the red mixture, his hands pressed, rubbed and traced patterns over her body. After giving special attention to the jaguar rosettes around her nipples, he covered the rest of her body with geometric designs that would gradually turn black. "The cultural aspects of body painting are many. Some of these colorful signs stand for health, beauty and harmony."

"I'm going to experience a spiritual connection with you, aren't I?"

"Can't promise you that, but it'll be a colorful one. Now I want you to paint black circles and horizontal and vertical lines on my face in honor of the jaguar. This stuff acts as an insect repellent, and it's also bactericidal and germicidal. The downside is you won't be able to wash it all off for ten days or so."

After Robina decorated his face and finished covering his back with designs, she branded more geometrical shapes onto his torso. While sharing this potent magic with her, he hoped she'd become aware of the visions, inner voices and the spirits of nature washing over her.

With the glow of her fierce possessiveness in the mirror of her eyes, he suddenly jumped up and darted into the jungle.

Flying over the lianas and ferns, he reveled in the thought of being captured

by the redhead. Painted in homage to the jaguar, he wanted none of the animal's powerful and combative qualities to come into play. The slumbering beast inside him must stay asleep. And, although he burned to share some down-to-earth passion with her, he pushed back a need to rush into a momentary explosion of savage eroticism. He wanted his surging desire to stretch out as long as possible.

Waiting behind a giant Brazil nut tree, he sensed how everything breathed as one. Everything. The heat and humidity of the thick teeming jungle vegetation combined with the sunlight, gave the spot he'd chosen a playful innocence and purity. The rustling of leaves and the whir and hum of the insects created the music.

As he watched a flash of red and black skin dart across the green foliage, every cell in his body cried out for her. Acting as wild and instinctual as his beast, a simmering primal need pierced the core of him and demanded a physical connection with the beauty.

Catching his fiery stalker, he pushed her back against a tree and drew in her outdoorsy smell. The jungle experienced long dry spells and when it finally rained, the air exuded a gloriously aromatic scent. Robina smelled like that.

The perspiration seeping down from her forehead, held its own magic, too. It gave him sensory and chemical information. Because her genes for resistance to disease were completely different from his, their children would benefit with

strong immune systems. He smiled inwardly. Right at the moment, a child's defense against infection rated quite low on his professional check list.

When Robina let out a ragged fractured exhalation, he sensed her hunger. Pushing his tongue into her mouth, the stroking, twining, snaking and dueling were done with an ever-increasing insistent pressure.

His whole body rose to a dizzying fever pitch, and he upgraded the burning tension in his groin to damn painful. The imminent storm screaming for release went far beyond the wild intensity of his need to be rushed along to a far horizon. The universe swept through him like some mysterious psychic force. In his heart, he knew nothing would ever be as fulfilling, thrilling or important as this urge to join up with the mind and spirit of the redheaded adventurer.



A strange yet somehow familiar untamed reckless intoxication overtook Robina as Elejandro sucked a nipple sitting in the middle of a red painted rosette. And then, with long delicious strokes, licked away the tasty paint surrounding it. A surge of heat flared up and raced through her body as a sensually torturous rhythm started inside her head.

With the filtered sunlight shimmering down on Elejandro, the designs on his body changed shape. Carried along by the eroticism the paintings conveyed, she thought of him as an exotic wild spirit, one with the supernatural powers

inhabiting this landscape. Yearning for a closer connection with him, she intended to lay claim to him.

Gently pulling on Elejandro's mop of thick hair, she raised his head and pushed him onto his back. Determined to peel away a few more layers and reach inside his ripe core, she got on top of him and slid her inner lips against his shaft. Pressing her thighs against his, she began to twist, rock and gyrate.

The paint on their bodies blended into a blackened mess, an exquisite squishy mingling of red and blue-black paint. Lingering in that position, with her hips pressed against her shifter, and her breasts flattened against his smooth chest, she felt as though their bodies melted into one dark velvet spirit. Licking the paint high up on his shoulder and between the muscles of his neck, she searched for just the right place to bite into his flesh. When she did, Elejandro's loud groan and his ensuing explosion were accompanied by a chain reaction of jerks and jolts. As she lapped up tiny drops of blood, it gave her such a rush that her orgasm erupted and damn near blew her mind.



Elejandro woke up shortly after Robina. On her side, she'd been watching him and soaking in the delicious sensation that came from knowing their souls were etched on each other's hearts. Inside her body, his presence took up residence. "I've laid claim to your body, big guy."

Running his finger over the wound on his neck, he gave her a lecherous grin. “That’s some bite you’ve got...you actually broke my skin, you little devil. If you failed to mark me for life, you’re welcome to give it another try. The female jaguars on the island aren’t shifters, so they’re not interested in me. But, when I’m ready to give lectures, we’ll travel the world. And that’s when I’ll have to fight off babes who aren’t shifters—maybe even jaguar hybrids or regular shifters. Instead of a wedding ring, I’ll show them your teeth marks.”

Well, that just chaps my ass! “When a gal makes her moves on you...that’s when my fangs will break loose.”

“There you go again my little feline. Always trying to seduce me with your sweet talk.”

After sitting up, she swung her legs on both sides of his face. Using her knees to support her, she gently rocked her hips while making sure her vagina hovered over the bottom part of his face.

Elejandro put a stop to her gyrating when he swept his tongue through her feverish inner flesh. And, as the heat between her legs intensified, her aching clit turned into a fiery center of pleasure and maddeningly exquisite tension. While he continued to swipe the inner lips of her labia, she soaked up the mysterious force that radiated through every pore in her body. Climbing to never before reachable heights of exaltation, her lower body vibrated and smoldered with such rampant

energy, she found it almost impossible to stand the achiness close to pain now.

The words pushing their way up her diaphragm made no sense whatever. They sounded archaic and lent an even more blissful element to her overheated body. Shuddering and thrashing against his mouth in wild abandonment, violent spasms ripped through her body. Mystical messages reverberated inside her body as supernatural forces worked with and through her.

Elejandro's tongue continued to maintain control of her engorged, hardened nub while she gave vent to her passionate release with an involuntary animal-like purr. Her hips, thighs and stomach continued to quiver with aftershocks; it seemed to take forever before her ecstatic physical response simmered down.

Assuring herself that her black and red pudding paste body looked no worse than Elejandro's, she gazed at him languidly. On his back beside her, his arms pillowed his head. Noticing his manly appendage jerked, shimmered and shifted in the speckled sunlight she sat up, wrapped her hand around it and gave it a critical examination. "I'll have to do something about this restless member. We never meant to paint it, but here it is covered in a mix of red and black paint. I'll just have to clean it up." With that, she slipped her mouth over its shiny head and began to hum. "M-m-m-m."

A few moments later, when one of her hands began to gently squeeze one of his testicles, while the other one slid up and down the underside of his surging

erection, Elejandro let out a ragged moan.

Climbing on top of him, she placed his penis at the entrance to her passage. Then, sliding down the rock hard length of him, she grasped him with her inner muscles, tightening her hot channel. Flexing and grinding, she absorbed the essence of him, his strength and masculinity.

Gazing down on his heavy-lidded eyes, she sensed his impending loss of control. When he stiffened and his breath caught before he let out a long drawn out guttural groan, her own climax caught her off guard.

Slowly coming out of her delicious stupor, she thrust her hip between Elejandro's thighs and surrendered to the cuddling and tenderness—the afterplay that gave the seal of approval to their lovemaking. Feeling rested and clear-minded, she thought of him and the animal that prowled within his body. They'd confronted startling cruelty and won.

During an out-of-body experience, she'd stepped inside a female jaguar's body—a liberating experience to be sure. But she'd also become aware of her inner power animal, and its presence lent her deeper levels of strength and flexibility. Envisioning that feral power unleashed, she dreamt of the day her female jungle cat prowled through the tangled forest of the night and kept everything in balance.

She'd changed in other ways, too. She'd thrown out her ego, removed her blinders and opened her heart to a world much more important than the one she'd

formerly embraced. And, along with her intimate and profound transformation came a reality that would keep her forever challenged and mystified.

The End

Author Bio

As a teacher in the Vancouver area for twenty-five years, I enjoyed fostering the creative gifts of children. Ten years ago, I became a member of R.W.A. and with the encouragement of my husband, a science teacher, and son, a poet and non-fiction writer, I decided to express my own imaginative visions.

It was in the blending of the romance and occult themes that I found my creative impulses could be most fully released, and I have devoted myself to the writing of paranormal romances. My husband made it all so easy. A romantic man, he decided to conduct his experiments in the kitchen, and soon found that the rewards for vacuuming were well worth the effort.

Slated for print, my 2008 e-book novel, "Going to Extremes", was published by Red Rose Publishing. My e-book novel "Dancer Near the Flame", published in 2007 by New Concepts Publishing Inc., received a five star review from Euro-Reviews. In my latest novel, "The Jaguar and Redhead", based in the Amazon Jungle, my three protagonists adventured deeper and deeper into a world of gold smuggling and unspeakable atrocities. While they experienced their wild and dangerous ride, they became entangled in a passionate love triangle.